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NOVELETS

HOW SPOILERS BLEED	36	Clive Barker
A WOODEN TIGER	121	Lucius Shepard

SHORT STORIES

THE COUNTRY STORE	6	Ronald Anthony Cross
LAFAYETTE FAREWELL	26	Ray Bradbury
THE STAR WAR	68	Frederik Pohl
CITY BOY	76	Charles L. Grant
WHILE YOU'RE UP	95	Avram Davidson
RAT RUN	98	Wayne Wightman

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	14	Algis Budrys
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	22	Orson Scott Card
SCIENCE: The Horse Under the Hood	111	Isaac Asimov

CARTOONS: ED ARNO (35), JOSEPH FARRIS (67)

COVER BY DAVID SHANNON FOR "THE COUNTRY STORE"

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Ronald Anthony Cross wrote "Shiva Shiva" (September 1987). His latest concerns an archetypal representative from Earth in a place far from home, and it packs a lot of story into six pages.

The Country Store

By Ronald Anthony Cross

WHEN IT'S QUIET. Late at night. Summer. Hot. Still. You can hear the corn growing. Moving. Stalks writhing in slow motion. Reaching up into the dark sky, higher and higher. Rustling. The spark of magic that is life rushing up the stalks to explode into ears of corn. The great mystery. The Mother is here.

So far from Earth? On this asteroid, with the delicate atmosphere protected and contained within a dome, like one of those miniature rural scenes encased in glass: shake it and it snows. So very far from Earth.

"How can I be so far from Earth, little one? You are Earth. You can be only Earth. And so wherever you go must become Earth. And I will be there. Do you understand?"

"I'm sleepy."

"Good. Then sleep, little one."

And then Selena drifted off into the soft sighs and rustling of the corn

outside her window, which became whispering, which she could almost understand. Which she

"Come on, Sparky. Faster. Come on."

Sparky barked and pranced and scrambled. He was trying to come on with everything he had. And, in fact, it wasn't that he wasn't moving as fast as Lena, but that all of his parts were moving too fast in too many directions at once. Including his mind, such as it was. So that he chased off after everything that crossed his path, jumped straight up for the hell of it, and stopped and barked at each object of wonder. He also wasted a lot of energy by wagging his entire behind on the end of his tail. In short, he behaved the way all puppies behave when you're in a hurry to get someplace.

Selena, on the other hand, was anxious to get to Pop Cramer's store. Daddy drove into town only every once in a blue moon (whatever that was), and he didn't always take her with him. Today was the first time he had entrusted her to do the grocery shopping, while he took care of some other business. Selena suspected that part of that business might be hoisting a couple of beers with the boys that hung out at the Black Cat Bar and Grill — oh well!

Anyhow, she was to do the shopping and then wait for him at Pop's. How long?

"However long it takes."

"Dad-dee!"

Of all the many people Selena knew — and though to us it would seem few, to her it seemed many — she liked Pop Cramer best. Part was Pop, and part was probably the store, though Selena would not have thought of it that way. She did not separate Pop from the store. Pop was the store. And the old man existed only in his relationship with it. There he always was, dusting this, polishing that, handing out or pointing out those glistening magical objects one could purchase. "Hold on a minute. Don't just come barging on in here like a bull in a china shop." (Whatever that was. Selena pictured an exotic city where small, beautiful yellow-skinned people sat around in brightly colored silk pajamas drinking tea out of delicate tea-cups. In comes Mr. Bull and tries to sit down at their table. Oh, the expression on their faces!) "I'm washing my floors here. Wait just a minute. Cool off here. Step over there. See — where it's dry. You be careful, too.

I been working like a slave all morning long just to have you —" The old man would drone on and on, talking to himself more than you. Always talking to himself.

That was what Selena liked the most about him. She was one of those sensitive, intelligent children who tend to like old people best. And she loved to picture old Pop all alone, fussing away, moving stuff around and talking aloud to his store.

"Maybe the store talks back to him, Sparky." Selena tried that on her puppy for size, in one of her rest periods. Selena's normal method of locomotion was to run as fast as she could, until she was out of breath, then stop and rest up. Then sprint off as fast as she could again.

Sparky looked puzzled. But then, he always did. Then, just when it looked like he might come up with something, Selena was off again.

"Come on come on come on."

At last she arrived, and there it was, same as always, eternal: the country store. A miracle. Homey yet mysterious. It was so small, and yet, wonder of wonders, you could find almost anything there.

"How 'bout a baseball glove?"

"Sure thing, aisle 5-A, genuine imitation leather. Flown in here all the way from Planet Earth. Korea, at that!"

"How 'bout — some tortiglioni?"

"Don't know about them fancy names, Miss Smarty Pants, but right over there on aisle 5-B — other side from the baseball mitts, of course — I got every kind of genuine Italian noodle you ever laid eyes on. Little fat ones shaped like bows, wagon wheels, shells — you name 'em; I got 'em." And he did.

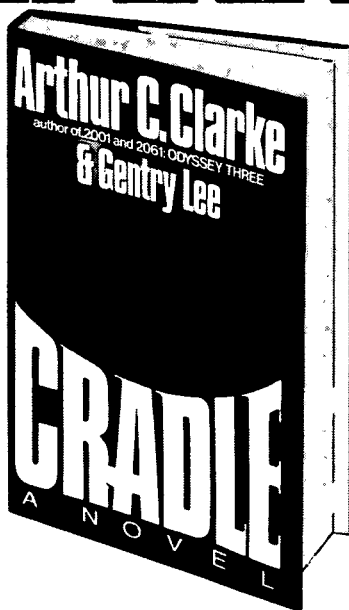
"How 'bout —"

"I got it. You name it; I got it!"

Today when Selena arrived — out of breath, as always — holding her dad's credit card proudly out in front of her ("Not a credit card, actually, honey; it's more just a way of keeping track of which one of us is using how much of what. You see, the Storm King gives it to all of us. It all belongs to us."), it seemed to her that old Pop was more attentive to her than ever before. Perhaps it was because she was the only one in the store, and because he'd already done just about everything a man could do to the place, as usual, and was left dusting off counters where no dust could ever accumulate.

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He followed her around the store, and generally snatched up whatever she was after before she could get to it, and gave a short dissertation on its history and usage, before popping it into her cart.

Finally, when she had finished, she discerned that he had been waiting for this moment.

"Now, by golly," he said, "I got something new and wonderful to show you; just came in last week. From Japan. Fairy. Ever hear of fairies? 'Course you have. 'Course you have. Well, they come from Earth, but they got 'em around here, too. You betcha.

"They come in a cage," he said, "but we're gonna let her out."

He whisked the cover off a golden cage, about the size and shape of a birdcage, and held it up for her to see. Something was moving swiftly inside, darting and hovering.

Selena held her breath. The toy was so lovely. A delicate little form that sang out from time to time a high, trilling note like a hummingbird.

"Activated by your light, you see. You just take the cover off the cage, and she starts flitting around and singing. Slow at first. Then faster and faster. Come on. Let's take her outside."

Outside, the sky, laced with creamy clouds, was just beginning to turn dark. Sparky, whom Pop had forced to wait outside, pranced about, jumping up and barking at the cage so that Selena had to pick him up and sternly tell him, "Shut up. Bad dog."

"Twilight," Pop said. "Perfect time for turning fairies loose.

"You see," Pop said, "they got instructions with 'em. Whatever you do, they say, don't turn 'em loose. 'Cause you won't never ever catch 'em again."

And he opened the cage. With a shrill cry, the lovely creature darted out the door and flashed away into the sky. Darted here and there, screamed in mechanical ecstasy, and was gone.

For a long time no one said anything at all. The sky was gradually darkening. But it was still bright, with lots of pink left in it, bouncing off the clouds.

"Cumulus," Pop said. "Looks like rain."

Selena strained for another glimpse of the fairy. But she was gone. "What will she do?"

"She'll probably fly up toward the light faster and faster till she breaks herself all apart and falls back down in pieces."

"But she's a toy, Pop. She's mechanical. You're supposed to sell her."

Pop said nothing, looked at the clouds, and went back inside.

Selena stayed outside on the porch. Soon she heard raucous cries: crows or pirates or little boys, she thought.

It was Owen Baxter, with his little brother Joshua tagging him about. Although Joshua was Selena's age, she thought of him as Owen's little brother. Nasty Owen, as she called him when she spoke to herself.

"Want to see somethin'?"

"Not much," Selena said. "Where's your dad?"

"Same place as yours, gettin' drunk down at the Black Cat. Mama's gonna bounce him off the wall like a handball when she sees him."

Little Josh jumped up and down excitedly. "Yeah, she will," he said. "She'll probably kick him like a football — or, or, maybe throw him through a hoop like a basketball — or, or —"

"Shut up, Josh. — Want to see somethin'?"

"Like what?"

"Something real funny."

"Yeah, real, real funny," Josh said.

Helplessly, in the face of a great foreboding, Selena followed them inside.

Pop Cramer was involved in dusting off cartons of fruit salad and putting them back, when the boys got to him, one on one side, one on the other.

"Hi, Pop."

"Hi, boys."

"Nice weather, ain't it, Pop?" Owen said.

"Looks like rain to me," Pop said.

"Nice weather, Pop?" Little Josh said. Pop spun around.

"Looks like rain to me."

"Nice weather."

Pop spun back frantically. "Looks like rain to . . ."

"Nice weather."

"Nice weather."

Selena watched in anguish as Pop Cramer spun back and forth, repeating the same phrase over and over, until she clapped her hands over her ears to shut it off.

But she could still see him helplessly spinning back and forth, acti-

vated, she realized, by the boys' voices the way the mechanical fairy creature was activated by light. Reacting — because Pop was a robot, he could only react, and go on and on reacting — until he fell apart and fell to Earth. And who would ever set him free from his perfect little store?

IT WAS well past dark when Dad staggered over to collect her.

In the skimmer, going home, she asked him, "Those guys you drink with at the Black Cat, Daddy — are they robots, like Pop?"

"You found out about Pop, honey. I didn't have the heart to tell you. Your mom and me thought — maybe you'd be happier not. . . . Yeah. Mostly, they are. Except little Josh's daddy, Willard, was there. Who told you about Pop?"

And that night, in her bedroom, she held two images in her mind's eye: one bright and lovely, of Pop setting loose the fairy from its cage; one dark and mordant, of Pop spinning back and forth, back and forth, reacting, trapped in a net of reaction.

What makes you so sure you're different? A voice from deep within her. When she had been younger, she had thought of it as the voice of a woman.

What do I do to resolve these two images? she asked it.

Nothing, the voice said. There is nothing you can do.

—And just for a moment it seemed to her that she could see a face just beginning to form in the dark, at once mysterious and familiar. She was almost asleep now, but she woke herself up again. There was something yet left to do.

"Here, Sparky," she said.

The next morning when her mother came into her room to wake her, she found Sparky dismantled on the floor. Momentarily, she staggered under a wave of grief. It's only a machine, she reminded herself. Then she was aware that Selena was watching her from the bed. Wide awake. She was actually smiling. But it was the smile of an older woman. The smile of an ancient. Sad. Omniscient. The Mother.

"I only want what's real," she said.



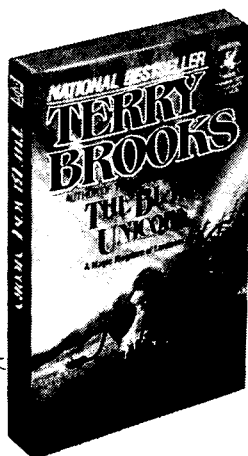
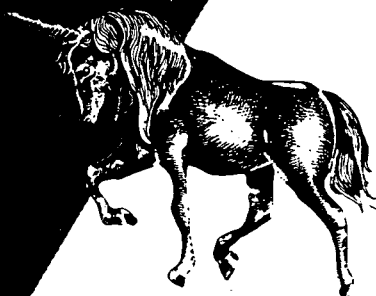
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A L G I S B U D R Y S

Marching Through Georgia, S.M. Stirling, Baen, \$3.50

Journey to Fusang, William Sanders, Questar, \$3.95

ALTERNATE WORLD histories are among the great surefire SF themes. In a literature devoted to considering what is eternal and what is ephemeral, the promise of an infinite variety of roots for the many-branched tree is a nearly irresistible one.

Looking at the world, one sees some real possibilities; what if Lee had won at Gettysburg? If John Wilkes Booth had been forestalled? If Tamerlane the Great had given Europe a higher priority? Tantalizingly, all three of those things so nearly happened that one sometimes wonders whether a Paratime Patrol is not operating out of our own future — or perhaps even our past. Certainly something unlikely ensures the continued existence of a culture that survives even its absurdest follies mostly through

the operation of absurd historical coincidences and only rarely by the emergence of a leader with a rational program and a popular mandate.*

I have noticed, thanks to this month's reading, that alternate histories divide into two sorts. There are those, like "Evening Primrose" and "If Lee had Lost at Gettysburg" and *Bring the Jubilee*, that do not go into great detail about how it is that Napoleon is obscure, or what created all the details of the Confederate victory, and confine themselves — if that is the word — to elaborating on things after the split in history has occurred. Of those, books like *Bring the Jubilee* are free to roam around the resulting alternate culture down through the years, inventing nomenclature, etc., and having a wonderful time analogous to a child's discovery of an insecure gate in the wall to a neighbor's estates.

**Perhaps they are all the same person. Who shot him in Dealey Plaza? Surely not the victors at the Bay of Pigs. Does Verkan Val exist, and if so, what are his politics?*

Of those, *Bring the Jubilee* has always seemed a little labored to me, while Keith Roberts' *Pavane*, marvelous as a compendium of short works in a shared milieu, suffers from the attempt to make it into a novel. Nevertheless, those are the two relatively contemporary works that tower up out of the years preceding what might now be called *Handmaid's Tale* time.

What with the Atwood, and similar recent works from others usually known for their descriptive fiction, not for SF, some vast phenomenon is going on out there in mundanity; a new thought has entered that nervous system and is nearing the brain on its immense journey up from the tail, and what we have known all along will sprout curious seedlings on the other side of the wall. At this moment some high school student who would otherwise have turned his attention toward foolproof roulette systems may be doodling the first equations that will forever rip out unassailable causality's bottom against some drifting Heisenberg.*

But those are, as noted, stories

**Has it ever occurred to any Stefnist to think on what must inevitably happen to general morality in a culture where sin can be expunged, as distinguished from expiated and forgiven? (Joe Halde-man's All My Sins Remembered does not, quite, apply.)*

in which the mere notion is so charming that reader demands only that author bring it up, not that he spend much time actually justifying it. Leo Frankowski's *Cross-Time Engineer*, for example, would be less entertaining if it tried to tell us much about how its hero gets from his time into the past or ours; the hints are more delicious for it ... and whet the appetite for the sequel, not a normal condition vis-a-vis today's SF.

The other approach is to make the events of the split itself central to the story; to do the military history of World War III as a guide, presumably, to serious contemplators of the resources available to a continuance of *realpolitik* by other means. It occurs to me as I write this that Fletcher Pratt overlooked a real bet in not offering the SF market in the 1950s his 1940 *Life* magazine feature on how World War II in the Pacific went. (It might be republished now, together with *Colliers'* big editorial takeout on "The War We Do Not Want," detailing the U.S. conquest of the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Both come with convincing illustrations.)

Note that these creations are different from actual World War III novels or post-Atomigeddon stories; the event, not the brave little band of would-be survivors, is the hero.

* * *

Marching Through Georgia, while ostensibly a paratime novel of the first sort, is much more one of the second . . . is not, in other words, a novel at all, and will be a disappointment if you read it with the wrong expectation. But, like military histories of unfought wars, or the "Sergeant Terry Bull" feature articles on nonexistent but possible military technology circa World War II, it engages the place in the mind where SF novels gestate, as *The War of The Worlds* finds its creative predecessor in "The Battle of Dorking."

Stirling's creation is about the Draka campaign into Soviet Georgia in the 1940s. It is the key tactic in a strategy to destroy the Wehrmacht now that it has fatally crippled the Red Army. Penultimately, Draka and the United States will divide hegemony over the world, with the U.S.A. increasingly the junior partner and eventual loser in the competition for dominance of the entire planet.

Who are the Draka? They are a white Anglo-Saxon culture deriving from a colony of exiled Loyalists founded on the tip of Africa in the aftermath of the American Revolution, incorporating substantial units of abandoned German mercenaries. Having grown by accretion of later waves of dissidents and rebels, these "Drakeians" have long since

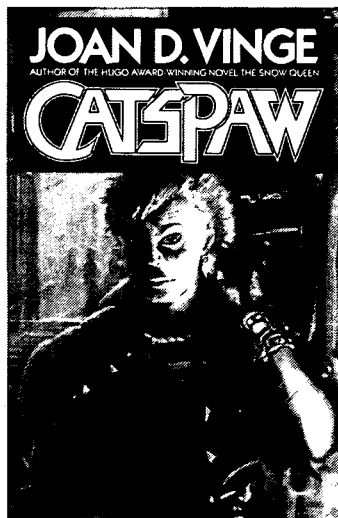
assimilated the Boers, and launched an expansive political program designed to end in making their culture the law-giver to the world. Some Draka realize this is because their culture — now called The Domination — is abominable to anyone else.

They have certain technological advantages to go with their aggressive social order. By offering a home to the dissident throughout the nineteenth century, they presented an attractive alternative to technological pioneers who would otherwise have stayed at home and fought for change against the vested interests. Thus the invention and employment of practical steam engines, for example, first occurred in Draka, and resulted in (Roberts-like) "road engines" on public highways rather than railroads on rights-of-way. Similarly, deisel-engine technology, and aviation, are advanced to what would roughly be a 1950s level in our world, while infantry-arms development is at least on par with our 1988 except perhaps for some of the special electronic devices and the heavy use of helicopters.

But there are — as yet — no nuclear devices, and gasoline-powered vehicles are rare.

In a work that should be of considerable interest to gamers as well as military history buffs, with

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CATSPAW. A spellbinding adventure from Joan D. Vinge, whom *Publishers Weekly* called "one of the reigning queens of science fiction."

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supporting appendices that go into great and for these purposes useful detail, Stirling has perhaps unwisely also attempted to be a sociologist, thus sounding at times like a science fiction writer. He provides us a hereditary Draka military family which in turn gives us an out-front protagonist in Eric von Shrakenberg, son of a General Staff officer and brother to a female fighter-pilot. A seasoned infantry unit commander, Eric is very well qualified to be the admirable protagonist of the very well portrayed detail battle scenes, but not so good at wondering whether *The Domination* is a desirable place to come from. Stirling is not very good at promising us that we shall see how Eric's privations and heroism will eventually lead to a democratic enlightenment in his culture — or, rather, Stirling is good at promising, not so good at delivering. Similarly, the American journalist reluctantly accepted as a war correspondent and attached to Eric's unit appears to be intended to produce a running commentary, but does so only haltingly and with crucial omissions that may serve the purposes of a sequel, but leave this book with more than a hint of reader-cheating when viewed standing alone.

My greatest problem with all this is that *The Domination* is technologically believable, but socio-

logically is nearly indistinguishable from the Western perception of the present South African regime. The major difference is that its aristocrats are white sadomasochistic hedonists rather than puritans. Inasmuch as the Boer component was expunged early, that is asking the Hessian ancestors to do a lot of work, and does not at all explain why the army is so Prussian, except in using classical Greek military nomenclature and in its heavy dependence on that Oriental invention, the Janissary. Nor does the lush architecture and landscaping seem to follow from any logical source and — my only technological cavil — I would suggest writers observe some attempts to fly rigid-hull airships through African continental weather before they glibly portray zeppelins trafficking happily through the sorts of storm that build up at the centers of large land-masses. But principally I in the end failed to buy Stirling's persistent hints that there were deep meanings to be found just one subtext down below the one I was looking at.

I kept stubbing my toe on all that, even while kept rather captivated by Stirling's battle scenes. What I was getting was real battles in an unreal world, and the appendices were of no help at all in that respect.

I can't imagine, either, any way in which this book would satisfy a reader attracted by the flippant title and/or the comic-book level cover art or the "You Don't Know How Lucky You Are, Boys" cover line, which represents yet one more direction this book is going off in. But I wouldn't have written it up if it weren't interesting wherever it goes; interesting doesn't have to be successful, and, also, interesting is getting scarce in this field. But the next book had better be better.

Journey to Fusang is, clearly, the sort of book that lays down its premise and then gets on with the real stuff as quickly as possible. The Mongols never turned back, they conquered Europe in the Middle Ages, there was never anything like Western civilization after that, Ireland is the seat of what culture there is, and therefore it kicks the viewpoint character out as fast as it is able.

Finn of No Fixed Abode is eventually in this story mistaken for Coyote, the great trickster. That pretty much describes him, except that he is also incredibly fast and accurate with a thrown knife, and a compulsive swordsman besides.

South America is Aztec. North America is divided among Arabs in the East and where New Orleans and St. Louis are, Chinese in Cali-

fornia and adjacent parts, and Amerinds in the middle. Obviously, — none of it is called America, or even really has an overall name, so Fusang, the name of the Chinese portion, is insinuated by the author. And — having departed Erin's shores as well as Dierdre's clout — thither Finn takes himself, by way of being an Arab slave for a while, then part of a shipload of living hearts being conveyed to the Aztecs, then a factotum to an Arab fur-trader, then a Chinese military intelligence agent and . . .

Serious students of alternate history should know that Sanders is in fact a master of hand-to-hand combat, as well as of stick-to-head and the best place to put the boot in, so all that is lovely authentic. Serious students of What Sort of Person Writes SF should know that my old friend Sundown Slim is an English composition teacher on the classical model, is best known in literary circles for his books on camping and canoeing, as well as his magazine columns on bicycle racing, that he was a folk guitarist at about the time Bob Dylan kicked Phil Ochs out of the cab in which the three of them were riding, that he grummed up his hand in a racing accident, that his Air Force career featured translating intercepts of Soviet air-defense radio, and that he tours by motorcycle, refusing to

enter a car and despising most cagers. Also, he is working up to going to live with the Indians, and makes it sound like a pretty damned attractive idea.

Slim, in short, is your basic Renaissance *condotierre*, and as we all know, such people are addicted to truly outrageous puns and the sort of irreverence that makes a character say, in the presence of a Ninja hang-gliding off the top of a Coconino County mesa, "Ah, there's a nip in the air," and also toss off a casual reference to the African kingdom of Yomamma. On the other hand, the character of Vladimir Khan is no joke at all unless you look at it that way, and Sanders may not be *seriously* proposing that Kemosabe is the Cheyenne word for "buffalo chip."

By the way, I may have garbled some of this up, in which case I shall hear from him about it and no plea that I was hysterical at the time will exculpate me. But the bottom line is that in addition to its use of the paratime mode to poke fun, and its use of the para-

time mode to build a convincing alternate America with convincing people and events in it, this is also the most captivating SF adventure novel I have read in many a moon. And I have mooned quite a few. Unrestrained and sporadically tasteless as Sanders's utterances are, his research is impeccable in every instance where I have gone over the same ground, his grammar is as good as mine, his sentences are shorter, and his sense of plot and storytelling is like nothing I have seen since the pulps folded. If he revels in his scenario — and you can see him doing that on every page — that scenario is tight and propulsive. And the tastelessness is rather well-handled.

I will not tell you this would have been as unique a work if the pulps had never died, for what this is — all this is — is a good pulp novel of a certain sort. But until Verkan Val gets in his next lick, this is now a thing as rare as it is cheerfully engrossing, and I am glad, glad, glad Slim put down his canoe long enough to produce it.



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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

William Sleator, *The Green Futures of Tycho*, (Bantam, paper, 130 pp, \$2.25); *Fingers* (Bantam Starfire, paper, 197 pp, \$2.95)

I'VE ALREADY called William Sleator's work to your attention in an earlier column; since then I've read two more of his novels, and thought they were worth mentioning.

Sleator, you'll recall, is a "young adult" writer, which means that when young readers are first introduced to science fiction, his books are likely to be among the ones they read. We couldn't be making a better first impression.

There's a darkness to Sleator's books. Almost all deal with poisoned families, and his protagonist almost always feels isolated, even hostile to parents or siblings or both. In the horror fantasy *Fingers*, the narrator, Sam, loathes his younger brother Humphrey, an obnoxious child prodigy. When Humphrey at age 15 gets too big to be a prodigy anymore, threatening the family in-

come, Sam is forced to compose phony musical pieces which they all pretend were "revealed" to Humphrey by the ghost of a dead second-rate composer named Magyar. But their pretense turns out to be real, as Magyar transforms both Sam and Humphrey into something more than they used to be before.

The Green Futures of Tycho again stars the singularly untalented brother among a family of genius children; but when Tycho finds an ancient alien artifact that allows him to go time traveling, he uses his new power to "set things straight" in his family. The result is a lesson on what absolute power does. It's also a telling exploration of family dynamics.

Neither book is as sophisticated or wise as Sleator's more recent *Singularity*, but both are rich with his understanding of the fears and resentments of the adolescent soul. Since all of us have adolescent souls, however we struggle to control them, Sleator speaks to us all. My nine-year-old son is passionate

in his enjoyment of Sleator's books — and so am I.

Ian Watson, *Queenmagic, Kingmagic* (St. Martin's, cloth, 205 pp, \$14.95)

Ian Watson is a writer who never does the same thing twice. Furthermore, he doesn't often do the same thing anybody *else* has done. *Queenmagic, Kingmagic* can't be compared with anything, except perhaps a screwy comparison like "This is how Pirandello might have written *Lord of the Rings*" or "With *Queenmagic, Kingmagic*, Franz Kafka meets T.H. White."

The hero, Pedino, who will be familiar to all of you who read Watson's wonderful novella "Queenmagic, Pawnmagic" in this magazine, is a young man who is found to have a "full soul" when with his magical power he inadvertently murders a friend who had lecherous designs on Pedino's sister. Pedino is taken into the palace, where he becomes a magical White Pawn in the vicious ongoing chess game between black and white magic in this medieval world.

Watson's adaptation of chess to form the basis of a fantasy world is marvelously entertaining, but Watson is never content with a tour-de-force. Pedino becomes obsessed with concern about what will hap-

pen if one side actually achieves checkmate and the world ends. What next?

The answer is a mad tour of worlds based on *Monopoly*, *Chutes and Ladders*, and other games, and by the time the novel ends, if your head isn't completely in a whirl you weren't paying attention. *Queenmagic, Kingmagic* is a frustrating book because it's so short — just when another writer might think he was well begun, Watson is done. But it's hardly a criticism when the worst thing I can say about a novel is that I wish there were more of it. It's fast and funny and painful and desperate, and it raises questions that will make you uncomfortable for days as you wonder if our own world is quite real.

Suzy McKee Charnas, *The Silver Glove* (Bantam Starfire, cloth, 162 pp, \$15.95); *The Bronze King* (Bantam Starfire, paper, 189 pp, \$2.95)

The narrator of Charnas's new series of young adult novels is Val, a girl just coming into adulthood in Manhattan. She lives with her divorced mother, and their relationship isn't as close as Val would like — her mom has troubles of her own. The result is that Val is pretty much on her own, except for her Granny Gran, who lives in a nearby rest home in New Jersey.

In *The Bronze King*, Val gets involved in an effort to stop a kraken from invading our world and swallowing it up. Charnas has conceived of a lovely kind of magic to keep such enemies at bay. There are key landmarks and structures in the world that make a kind of net, holding things together. A statue here, an old building there, and as long as they remain in place, we're safe, things won't collapse. But vandals and real estate developers, between them, have long been undoing our world until the kraken has been able to find a weak place where it can slip through and tear things apart.

Val teams up with a street magician named Paavo, who has been assigned as the magical guardian of our world, and a teenage boy named Joel, who is struggling with his identity in a musically brilliant family. Val also discovers that Granny Gran is one of the great wizards of our world, and at least some of Granny Gran's power has come down to Val.

To my delight, Charnas avoids both cliché and polemic. Joel and Val *don't* become good friends and have adventures together forever; and though Joel's attempt at being star of the show keeps him out of the climax altogether, Charnas doesn't turn it into a feminist lesson — rather it's a lesson about not

overreaching yourself in pursuit of glory.

The Silver Glove continues Val's story, only now the focus is closer to home. A renegade wizard is stealing the souls of old and helpless street people, and the only people who can possibly stop him are Granny Gran and her daughter and granddaughter. The wizard maneuvers to use our real-world laws against us — he gets Granny Gran diagnosed as having Alzheimer's, poses as Val's school counselor to get control of her, and seduces Val's mother both sexually and emotionally.

Charnas handles the sex so delicately that I, as strait-laced a parent as you're likely to find this side of the 700 Club, have no qualms about handing the book to my children; she handles the human relationships so truthfully that I have no apology about recommending this "young adult" novel to serious adult fantasy readers. The stories are exciting, the tension is unrelenting, the people and places are wonderfully real. With these books, Charnas joins Charles de Lint (*Yarrow; Jack the Giant-Killer*), Megan Lindholm (*The Wizard of the Pigeons*), and Tom Deitz (*Windmaster's Bane; Fireshaper's Doom*) in the movement toward contemporary magical fantasy — a much more promising literary development, I think, than contemporary horror.

NEWS FROM *Questar* SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY

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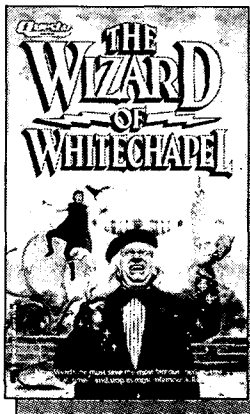
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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen



In recent years I have done a lot of traveling in connection with my work at Warner Books. London, Los Angeles, Kansas City, and King of Prussia, Pennsylvania—I've seen them all.

Places stick with me. The sights, the sounds, the friends I make, the things I learn, the sense of being there.

Master writers bring this sense of being there to their work. I, of course, have never been to a

New York where the subways run on magic (like those of Simon Hawke), nor have I been to an America where San Francisco is named Fusang (to name one of the wonderful touches of William Sanders' marvelous, picaresque *JOURNEY TO FUSANG*). It's the next thing to really being there... and a whole lot safer, too.

I hope to see you all at the Worldcon and if I do, ask me what comes after EON.

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We offer the second new Bradbury story in four months ("The Thing at the Top of the Stairs," July 1988). The new tale is about an Oscar winning cameraman, a former flyer for World War I's Lafayette Escadrille, who is haunted by ghosts of the past.

Lafayette Farewell

By Ray Bradbury

THERE WAS A tap on the door, the bell was not rung, so I knew who it was. The tapping used to happen once a week, but in the past few weeks, it came every other day. I shut my eyes, said a prayer, and opened the door. Bill Westerleigh was there, looking at me, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Is this *my* house or *yours*?" he said.

It was an old joke now. Several times a year he wandered off, a seventy-six-year-old man, to get lost within a few blocks away. He had quit driving years ago because he had wound up thirty miles out of Los Angeles instead of at the center where we were. His best journey nowadays was from next door, where he lived with his wondrously warm and understanding wife, to here, where he tapped, entered, and wept. "Is this your house or mine?" he said, reversing the order.

"*Mi casa es su casa.*" I quoted the old Spanish saying.

"And thank God for that."

I led the way to the sherry bottle and glasses in the parlor and poured

two glasses while Bill settled in an easy chair across from me. He wiped his eyes, and blew his nose on a handkerchief, which he then folded neatly and put back in his breast pocket.

"Here's to you, Buster." He waved his sherry glass. "The sky is full of 'em. I hope you come back. If not, we'll drop a black wreath where we think your crate fell."

I drank and was warmed by the drink, and then looked a long while at Bill.

"The Escadrille been buzzing you again?" I asked.

"Every night, right after midnight. Every morning now. And, the past week, noons. I try not to come over. I tried for three days."

"I know. I missed you."

"Kind of you to say, son. You have a good heart. But I know I'm a pest, when I have my clear moments. Right now I'm clear, and I drink to your hospitable health."

He emptied his glass, and I refilled it.

"You want to talk about it?"

"You sound just like a psychiatrist friend of mine. Not that I ever went to one; he was just a friend. Great thing about coming over here is, it's free, and sherry to boot." He eyed his drink pensively. "It's a terrible thing to be haunted by ghosts."

"We all have them. That's where Shakespeare was so bright. He taught himself, taught us, taught psychiatrists. Don't do bad, he said, or your ghosts will get you. The old remembrance, the conscience which doth make cowards and scare midnight men, will rise up and cry: Hamlet, remember me; Macbeth, you're marked; Lady Macbeth, you, too! Richard III, beware, we walk the dawn camp to your shoulder, and our shrouds are stiff with blood."

"God, you talk purty." Bill shook his head. "Nice living next door to a writer. When I need a dose of poetry, here you are."

"I tend to lecture. It bores my friends."

"Not me, dear Buster, not me. But you're right. I mean, what we were talking about. Ghosts."

He put his sherry down, and then held to the arms of his easy chair, as if it were the edges of a cockpit.

"I fly all the time now. It's 1918 more than it's 1987. It's France more than it's the U.S. of A. I'm up there with the old Lafayette. I'm on the

ground near Paris with Rickenbacker. And there, just as the sun goes down, is the Red Baron. I've had quite a life, haven't I, Sam?"

It was his affectionate mode to call me by six or seven assorted names. I loved them all. I nodded.

"I'm going to do your story someday," I said. "It's not every writer whose neighbor was part of the Escadrille and flew and fought against Von Richthofen."

"You couldn't write it, dear Ralph; you wouldn't know what to say."

"I might surprise you."

"You might, by God, you might. Did I ever show you the picture of myself and the whole Lafayette Escadrille team lined up by our junky biplane the summer of '18?"

"No," I lied, "let me see."

He pulled a small photo from his wallet and tossed it across to me. I had seen it a hundred times, but it was a wonder and a delight.

"That's me, in the middle left, the short guy with the dumb smile next to Rickenbacker." Bill reached to point.

I looked at all the dead men, for most were long dead now, and there was Bill, twenty years old and lark-happy, and all the other young, young, oh dear God, young men lined up, arms around each other, or one arm down holding helmets and goggles; and behind them a French 7-1 biplane; and beyond, the flat airfield somewhere near the western front. Sounds of flying came out of the damned picture. They always did, when I held it. And sounds of wind and birds. It was like a miniature TV screen. At any moment I expected the Lafayette Escadrille to burst into action, spin, run, and take off into that absolutely clear and endless sky. At that very moment in time, in the photo, the Red Baron still lived in the clouds; he would be there forever now and never land, which was right and good, for we wanted him to stay there always — that's how boys and men feel.

"God, I love showing you things." Bill broke the spell. "You're so damned appreciative. I wish I had had you around when I was making films at MGM."

That was the other part of William (Bill) Westerleigh. From fighting and photographing the western front half a mile up, he had moved on, when he got back to the States. From the Eastman Labs in New York, he had drifted to some flimsy film studios in Chicago, where Gloria Swanson had once starred, to Hollywood and MGM. From MGM he had shipped to

Africa to camera-shoot lions and the Watusi for *King Solomon's Mines*. Around the world's studios, there was no one he didn't know or who didn't know him. He had been principal cameraman on some two hundred films, and there were two bright gold Academy Oscars on his mantel next door.

"I'm sorry I grew up so long after you," I said. "Where's that photo of you and Rickenbacker alone? And the one signed by Von Richthofen."

"You don't want to see *them*, Buster."

"Like hell I don't!"

He unfolded his wallet and gently held out the picture of the two of them, himself and Captain Eddie, and the single snap of Von Richthofen in full uniform, and signed in ink below.

"All gone," said Bill. "Most of 'em. Just one or two, and me left. And it won't be long. . .," he paused, "before there's not even me."

And suddenly again, the tears began to come out of his eyes and roll down and off his nose.

I refilled his glass.

He drank it and said:

"The thing is, I'm not afraid of *dying*. I'm just afraid of dying and going to *Hell*!"

"You're not going there, Bill," I said.

"Yes, I am!" he cried out, almost indignantly, eyes blazing, tears streaming around his gulping mouth. "For what I did, what I can *never* be forgiven for!"

I waited a moment. "What was that, Bill?" I asked quietly.

"All those young boys I killed, all those young men I destroyed, all those beautiful people I murdered."

"You never did that, Bill," I said.

"Yes! I did! In the sky, dammit, in the air over France, over Germany, so long ago, but, Jesus, there they are every night now, alive again, flying, waving, yelling, laughing like boys, until I fire my guns between the propeller, and their wings catch fire and spin down. Sometimes they wave at me, O.K.! as they fall. Sometimes they curse. But, Jesus, every night, every morning now, the past month, they never leave. Oh, those beautiful boys, those lovely young men, those fine faces, the great shining and loving eyes, and down they go. And *I* did it. And I'll burn in Hell for it!"

"You will not — I repeat, not — burn in Hell," I said.

"Give me another drink and shut up," said Bill. "What do you know

about who burns and who doesn't? Are you Catholic? No. Are you Baptist? Baptists burn more slowly. There. Thanks."

I had filled his glass. He gave it a sip, the drink for his mouth meeting the stuff from his eyes.

"William." I sat back and filled my own glass. "No one burns in Hell for war. War's that way."

"We'll *all* burn," said Bill.

"Bill, at this very moment, in Germany, there's a man your age, bothered with the same dreams, crying in his beer, remembering too much."

"As well they should! They'll burn — he'll burn, too — remembering my friends, the lovely boys who got themselves screwed into the ground when their propellers chewed the way. Don't you see? *They* didn't know. I didn't know. No one told *them*; no one told *us*!"

"What?"

"What war was. Christ, we didn't know it would come after us, find us, so late in time. We thought it was all over; then we had a way to forget, put it off, bury it. Our officers didn't say. Maybe they just didn't know. None of us did. No one guessed that one day, in old age, the graves would bust wide, and all those lovely faces come up, and the whole war with 'em! How could we guess that? How could we know? But now the time's here, and the skies are full, and the ships just won't come down, unless they burn. And the young men won't stop waving at me at three in the morning, unless I kill them all over again. Jesus Christ. It's so terrible. It's so sad. How do I save them? What do I do to go back and say, Christ, I'm sorry; it should never have happened; someone should have warned us when we were happy. War's not just dying; it's remembering, and remembering late as well as soon. I wish them well. How do I say that? What's the next move?"

"There is no move," I said quietly. "Just sit here with a friend and have another drink. I can't think of anything to do. I wish I could. . . ."

Bill fiddled with his glass, turning it round and round.

"Let me tell you, then," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"Tonight, maybe tomorrow night's the last time you'll ever see me."

"Bill . . . Bill. . . ."

"No. Hear me out."

He leaned forward, gazing up at the high ceiling and then out the

window where storm clouds were being gathered by wind.

"They've been landing in our backyards, the past few nights. You wouldn't have heard. Parachutes make sounds like kites, soft kind of whispers. The parachutes come down on our back lawns. Other nights, the bodies, without parachutes. The good nights are the quiet ones when you just hear the silk and thread on the clouds. The bad ones are when you hear 180 pounds of aviator hit the grass. The really great nights are the ones when you hear nothing. Then you can sleep. Last night a dozen things hit the bushes near my bedroom window. I looked up in the clouds tonight, and they were full of planes and smoke. Can you make them stop?"

There was a long silence.

"Then," he said, "you can't help? You don't believe me?"

"That's the one thing, I *do* believe."

He sighed, a deep sigh that released his soul.

"Thank God! But what do I do *next*?"

I got up and walked to the window.

"Have you," I asked, "tried *talking* to them?"

"Say *that* again!" He leaned forward, suddenly feverish.

"I mean," I said, "have you asked for their *forgiveness*?"

"Would they *listen*?"

"They might."

"Would they *forgive*?"

"You can only try, Bill."

"My God," he said. "Of course! Why not? I have nothing to lose except my mind. Will you come *with me*? Your backyard. It's bigger. No trees for them to get strung up in. Christ, or on your porch. . . ."

"The porch, I think."

I went over to the living room french doors. I opened them and stepped out. It was a calm evening, with only touches of wind motioning the trees and changing the clouds.

Bill was behind me, a bit unsteady on his feet, a hopeful grin, part panic, on his face, his glass refilled on the way to following me.

I looked at the sky and the rising moon.

"Nothing out here," I said.

"Oh Christ, yes, there is. Look," he said. "No, wait. Listen."

I stood, turning white cold, wondering why I waited, and listened.

"Why do you put up with me?" he asked suddenly.

"Because," I said, "I've known you and Gert for twenty-two years, and I love you. What do we do next?"

"Stand out in the middle of your garden, where they can see us? You don't have to if you don't want."

"Hell," I lied, "I'm not afraid."

"No?" He studied my face. "Open another bottle. What time is it?"

"Ten minutes after midnight."

"Hurry!"

I ran in and ran out with the bottle.

"To the Lafayette Escadrille?" I said.

"No, no!" cried Bill, alarmed. "Not tonight. They mustn't hear *that*. To *them*, Doug. *Them*." He motioned his glass at the sky, where the clouds flew over in squadrons, and the moon was a round white tombstone world.

I nodded at the ghost clouds.

"Yes," I said. "To them."

"Richthofen, and the beautiful, sad young men."

I repeated his words in a whisper.

And then we drank, lifting our empty glasses so the clouds and the moon and the silent sky could see.

"I'm ready," said Bill, "if they want to come get me now. Better to die out here than go in and hear them landing every night, and every night in their parachutes, and no sleep until dawn, when the last silk folds in on itself and the bottle's empty. Stand right over there, son. That's it. Just half in the shadow. Near enough to make me feel good. Far enough off so if anything drops, it's only me. Now."

I moved back, and we waited.

"What'll I say to them?" he asked.

"God, Bill," I said, "I don't know. They're not my friends."

"They weren't mine, either. More's the pity. I *thought* they were the enemy. Christ, isn't that a dumb, stupid, half-ass world. The enemy! As if such a thing ever really happened in the world. Sure, maybe the bully that chased you in the schoolyard and knocked you ass over eardrums, or the guy who took your girl and laughed at you. But them, them, those beauties, up in the clouds on summer days or autumn afternoons. No, no."

He moved farther out on the porch.

"All right," he whispered. "Here I am. I deserve anything you want to give."

And he leaned way out, and opened his arms as if to embrace the night air.

"Come on! What you waiting for!"

He shut his eyes. He leaned so far out I thought he might topple and fall.

I reached to steady him, but he pulled away. "Don't."

I stood back and waited.

"Your turn," he cried at last. "Last chance. My God, you got to hear; you got to come. You beautiful bastards, here I am!"

And he tilted his head back as if to welcome a dark rain.

"Are they coming?" he whispered aside, eyes shut.

"No," I had to admit.

Bill lifted his old face into the air and stared upward, willing the clouds to shift and change and become something more than clouds. Demanding that great blossom shapes drop down in an immense snowfall to drape the roofs and curtain the hedges.

"Damn it!" he cried at last. "I'm here. I killed you all. Forgive me or come kill me!" And a final angry burst: "Forgive me. I'm sorry!"

The force of his voice was enough to push me completely back into shadows. Maybe that did it. Maybe Bill standing like a small statue in the middle of my garden made the clouds shift and the wind blow south instead of north. We both heard, a long way off, an immense whisper.

"Yes!" cried Bill, and to me, aside, eyes shut, teeth clenched: "You, you hear!?"

And there was another shift, a disturbance of clouds as if a giant propeller, invisible, had passed through and was gone.

We heard another sound, closer now, like great flowers or blossoms lifted off spring trees and run along the sky.

"There," whispered Bill.

The clouds seemed to form a lid and make a vast silken shape that dropped in serene silence upon the land. It almost seemed to me, though it could not be so, that it looked like the biggest damned parachute in the history of mankind. It fell so silently that it terrified me. It made a shadow that crossed the town and hid the houses and at last reached our garden and shadowed the grass and put out the light of the moon and then hid Bill from my sight.

"Yes! They're coming," cried Bill. "Feel them? One, two, a dozen! Oh God, yes."

And all around, in the dark, I thought I heard apples and plums and peaches falling from unseen trees, the sound of boots hitting my lawn, and the sound of pillows striking the grass like bodies, and the swarming of tapestries of white silk or smoke, or, God knows, the very warp and woof of men's souls torn from their bodies and flung across the disturbed air.

"Bill!"

"No!" he yelled. "I'm O.K.! They're all around. Don't come between. Yes!"

There was a tumult in the garden. The hedges blew as from an array of propellers I could not see. The grass lay down its nap. A tin watering can blew across the yard. Birds were flung from trees. Dogs all around the block yelped and whimpered. Lights came on in a dozen houses. A siren, from another war, sounded ten miles away. A storm had arrived, and was that thunder above, or field artillery?

And one last time, I heard Bill say, almost quietly this time, "I didn't know, oh God, I didn't know what I was doing." And a final fading sound of "Please."

And the rain fell briefly to mix with the tears on his face.

And the rain stopped and the clouds blew away, and then the wind was still.

I waited.

"Well." He wiped his eyes, and blew his nose on his big hankie, and looked at the hankie as if it were the map of France, and went on. "It's time to go. Do you think I'll get lost again?"

"If you do, you can always come here."

"My home away from home, sure." He moved around the side of the house, his eyes clear. "How much do I owe you, Sigmund?"

"Well that was only a *thirty-minute* hour."

"And cheap at half the price."

I gave him a hug. He walked down the street.

When he got to the corner, he seemed to be confused. He turned to his right, then his left, standing there. I waited a moment, and then called, as gently as possible:

"To your left, Bill, your left!"

"God bless you, Buster!" he said, and waved.

He turned and went into his house.

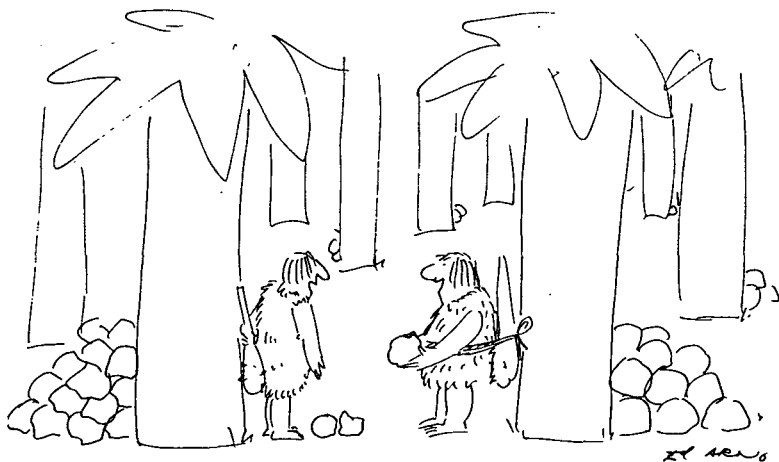
THEY FOUND him a month later, wandering two miles from home. A month after that he was in the hospital, in France all the time now, and Rickenbacker in the bed to his right and Richt-hofen in the cot to his left.

The day after his funeral, the Oscar arrived, carried by his wife, to place on my mantel, with a single red rose beside it, and the picture of Von Richthofen, and the other picture of the gang lined up in the summer of '18, and the wind blowing out of the picture, and the buzz of planes. And the sound of young men laughing as if they might go on forever.

Sometimes I come down at three in the morning when I can't sleep, and I stand looking at Bill and his friends. And sentimental sap that I am, I wave a drink of sherry at them and give them a toast.

"Farewell, Lafayette," I say. "Lafayette farewell."

And they all laugh as if it were the grandest joke that they ever heard.



THE BIRTH OF THE CREDIBILITY GAP

Stephen King and others have said that England's Clive Barker is the best of new writers of horror tales. He is certainly the hottest and the most versatile, having started out as a playwright, moved on to short stories and novels (*THE DAMNATION GAME*, *WEAVERWORLD*) and to films as both writer and director (*HELLRAISER*). "How Spoilers Bleed," his first F&SF story, is from the forthcoming book *CABAL*, to be published by Poseidon Press.

HOW SPOILERS BLEED

By Clive Barker

LOCKE RAISED HIS EYES TO the trees. The wind was moving in them, and the commotion of their laden branches sounded like the river in full spate. One impersonation of many. When he had first come to the jungle he had been awed by the sheer multiplicity of beast and blossom, the relentless parade of life here. But he had learned better. This burgeoning diversity was a sham; the jungle pretending itself an artless garden. It was not. Where the untutored trespasser saw only a brilliant show of natural splendors, Locke now recognized a subtle conspiracy at work, in which each thing mirrored some other thing. The trees, the river; a blossom, a bird. In a moth's wing, a monkey's eye; on a lizard's back, sunlight on stones. Round and round in a dizzying circle of impersonations, a hall of mirrors which confounded the senses and would, given time, rot reason altogether. See us now, he thought drunkenly as they stood around Cherick's grave, look at how we play the game too. We're living, but we

impersonate the dead better than the dead themselves.

The corpse had been one scab by the time they'd hoisted it into a sack and carried it outside to this miserable plot behind Tetelman's house to bury. There were half a dozen other graves here. All Europeans, to judge by the names crudely burned into the wooden crosses; killed by snakes, or heat, or longing.

Tetelman attempted to say a brief prayer in Spanish, but the roar of the trees, and the din of birds making their way home to their roosts before night came down, all but drowned him out. He gave up eventually, and they made their way back into the cooler interior of the house, where Stumpf was sitting, drinking brandy and staring inanely at the darkening stain on the floorboards.

Outside, two of Tetelman's tamed Indians were shovelling the rank jungle earth on top of Cherrick's sack, eager to be done with the work and away before nightfall. Locke watched from the window. The grave-diggers didn't talk as they labored, but filled the shallow grave up, then flattened the earth as best they could with the leather-tough soles of their feet. As they did so, the stamping of the ground took on a rhythm. It occurred to Locke that the men were probably the worse for bad whisky; he knew few Indians who didn't drink like fish. Now, staggering a little, they began to dance on Cherrick's grave.

"Locke?"

Locke woke. In the darkness, a cigarette glowed. As the smoker drew on it, and the tip burned more intensely, Stumpf's wasted features swam up out of the night.

"Locke? Are you awake?"

"What do you want?"

"I can't sleep," the mask replied. "I've been thinking. The supply plane comes in from Santarem the day after tomorrow. We could be back there in a few hours. Out of all this."

"Sure."

"I mean permanently," Stumpf said. "Away."

"Permanently?"

Stumpf lit another cigarette from the embers of his last before saying, "I don't believe in curses. Don't think I do."

"Who said anything about curses?"

"You saw Cherrick's body. What happened to him . . ."

"There's a disease," said Locke, "what's it called? — when the blood doesn't set properly?"

"Haemophilia," Stumpf replied. "He didn't have haemophilia and we both know it. I've seen him scratched and cut dozens of times. He mended like you or me."

Locke snatched at a mosquito that had alighted on his chest and ground it out between thumb and forefinger.

"All right. Then what killed him?"

"You saw the wounds better than I did, but it seemed to me his skin just broke open as soon as he was touched."

Locke nodded. "That's the way it looked."

"Maybe it's something he caught off the Indians."

Locke took the point. "I didn't touch any of them," he said.

"Neither did I. But he did, remember?"

Locke remembered; scenes like that weren't easy to forget, try as he might. "Christ," he said, his voice hushed. "What a fucking situation."

"I'm going back to Santarem. I don't want them coming looking for me."

"They're not going to."

"How do you know? We screwed up back there. We could have bribed them. Got them off the land some other way."

"I doubt it. You heard what Tetelman said. Ancestral territories."

"You can have my share of the land," Stumpf said. "I want no part of it."

"You mean it then? You're getting out?"

"I feel dirty. We're spoilers, Locke."

"It's your funeral."

"I mean it. I'm not like you. Never really had the stomach for this kind of thing. Will you buy my third off me?"

"Depends on your price."

"Whatever you want to give. It's yours."

Confessional over, Stumpf returned to his bed, and lay down in the darkness to finish off his cigarette. It would soon be light. Another jungle dawn: a precious interval, all too short, before the world began to sweat. How he *hated* the place. At least he hadn't touched any of the Indians; hadn't even been within breathing distance of them. Whatever infection they'd passed on to Cherrick, he could surely not be tainted. In less than forty-eight hours he would be away to Santarem, and then on to some city, any city, where the tribe could never follow. He'd already done his

penance, hadn't he paid for his greed and his arrogance with the rot in his abdomen and the terrors he knew he would never quite shake off again? Let that be punishment enough, he prayed, and slipped, before the monkeys began to call up the day, into a spoiler's sleep.

A gem-backed beetle, trapped beneath Stumpf's mosquito net, hummed around in diminishing circles, looking for some way out. It could find none. Eventually, exhausted by the search, it hovered over the sleeping man, then landed on his forehead. There it wandered, drinking at the pores. Beneath its imperceptible tread, Stumpf's skin opened and broke into a trail of tiny wounds.

THEY HAD come into the Indian hamlet at noon; the sun a basilisk's eye. At first they had thought the place deserted. Locke and Cherrick had advanced into the compound, leaving the dysentery-ridden Stumpf in the Jeep, out of the worst of the heat. It was Cherrick who first noticed the child. A pot-bellied boy of perhaps four or five, his face painted with thick bands of the scarlet vegetable dye *urucu*, had slipped out from his hiding place and come to peer at the trespassers, fearless in his curiosity. Cherrick stood still; Locke did the same. One by one, from the huts and from the shelter of the trees around the compound, the tribe appeared and stared, like the boy, at the newcomers. If there was a flicker of feeling on their broad, flat-nosed faces, Locke could not read it. These people — he thought of every Indian as part of one wretched tribe — were impossible to decipher; deceit was their only skill.

"What are you doing here?" he said. The sun was baking the back of his neck. "This is our land."

The boy still looked up at him. His almond eyes refused to fear.

"They don't understand you," Cherrick said.

"Get the Kraut out here. Let him explain it to them."

"He can't move."

"Get him out here," Locke said. "I don't care if he's shat his pants."

Cherrick backed away down the track, leaving Locke standing in the ring of huts. He looked from doorway to doorway, from tree to tree, trying to estimate the numbers. There were at most three dozen Indians, two-thirds of them women and children; descendants of the great peoples that had once roamed the Amazon Basin in their tens of thousands. Now those tribes were all but decimated. The forest in which they had prospered for

generations was being leveled and burned; eight-lane highways were speeding through their hunting grounds. All they held sacred — the wilderness and their place in its system — was being trampled and trespassed: they were exiles in their own land. But still they declined to pay homage to their new masters, despite the rifles they brought. Only death would convince them of defeat, Locke mused.

Cherrick found Stumpf slumped in the front seat of the Jeep, his pasty features more wretched than ever.

"Locke wants you," he said, shaking the German out of his doze.

"The village is still occupied. You'll have to speak to them."

Stumpf groaned. "I can't move," he said, "I'm dying —"

"Locke wants you dead or alive," Cherrick said. Their fear of Locke, which went unspoken, was perhaps one of the two things they had in common; that and greed.

"I feel awful," Stumpf said.

"If I don't bring you, he'll only come himself," Cherrick pointed out. This was indisputable. Stumpf threw the other man a despairing glance, then nodded his jowly head. "All right," he said, "help me."

Cherrick had no wish to lay a hand on Stumpf. The man stank of his sickness; he seemed to be oozing the contents of his gut through his pores; his skin had the luster of rank meat. Cherrick took the outstretched hand nevertheless. Without aid, Stumpf would never make the hundred yards from Jeep to compound.

Ahead, Locke was shouting.

"Get moving," said Cherrick, hauling Stumpf down from the front seat toward the bawling voice. "Let's get it over and done with."

When the two men returned into the circle of huts the scene had scarcely changed. Locke glanced around at Stumpf.

"We got trespassers," he said.

"So I see," Stumpf returned wearily.

"Tell them to get the fuck off our land," Locke said. "Tell them this is our territory: we bought it. Without sitting tenants."

Stumpf nodded, not meeting Locke's rabid eyes. Sometimes he hated the man almost as much as he hated himself.

"Go on . . ." Locke said, and gestured for Cherrick to relinquish his support of Stumpf. This he did. The German stumbled forward, head bowed. He took several seconds to work out his patter, then raised his

head and spoke a few wilting words in bad Portuguese. The pronouncement was met with the same blank looks as Locke's performance. Stumpf tried again, rearranging his inadequate vocabulary to try and awake a flicker of understanding amongst these savages.

The boy who had been so entertained by Locke's cavortings now stood staring up at this third demon, his face wiped of smiles. This one was nowhere near as comical as the first. He was sick and haggard; he smelled of death. The boy held his nose to keep from inhaling the badness off the man.

Stumpf peered through greasy eyes at his audience. If they *did* understand, and were faking their blank incomprehension, it was a flawless performance. His limited skills defeated, he turned giddily to Locke.

"They don't understand me," he said.

"Tell them again."

"I don't think they speak Portuguese."

"Tell them anyway."

Cherrick cocked his rifle. "We don't have to talk with them," he said under his breath. "They're on our land. We're within our rights —"

"No," said Locke. "There's no need for shooting. Not if we can persuade them to go peacefully."

"They don't understand plain common sense," Cherrick said. "Look at them. They're animals. Living in filth."

Stumpf had begun to try to communicate again, this time accompanying his hesitant words with a pitiful mime.

"Tell them we've got work to do here," Locke prompted him.

"I'm trying my best," Stumpf replied testily.

"We've got papers."

"I don't think they'd be much impressed," Stumpf returned, with a cautious sarcasm that was lost on the other man.

"Just tell them to move on. Find some other piece of land to squat on."

Watching Stumpf put these sentiments into words and sign-language, Locke was already running through the alternative options available. Either the Indians — the Txuhahamei or the Achnal or whatever damn family it was — accepted their demands and moved on, or else they would have to enforce the edict. As Cherrick had said, they were within their rights. They had papers from the development authorities; they had maps marking the division between one territory and the next; they had every

sanction from signature to bullet. He had no active desire to shed blood. The world was still too full of bleeding heart liberals and doe-eyed sentimentalists to make genocide the most convenient solution. But the gun had been used before, and would be used again, until every unwashed Indian had put on a pair of trousers and given up eating monkeys.

Indeed, the din of liberals notwithstanding, the gun had its appeal. It was swift, and absolute. Once it had had its short, sharp say there was no danger of further debate; no chance that in ten years' time some mercenary Indian who'd found a copy of Marx in the gutter would come back claiming his tribal lands — oil, minerals and all. Once gone, they were gone forever.

At the thought of these scarlet-faced savages laid low, Locke felt his trigger-finger itch; physically *itch*. Stumpf had finished his encore, it had met with no response. Now he groaned, and turned to Locke.

"I'm going to be sick," he said. His face was bright white; the glamour of his skin made his small teeth look dingy.

"Be my guest," Locke replied.

"Please. I have to live down. I don't want them watching me."

Locke shook his head. "You don't move till they listen. If we don't get any joy from them, you're going to see something to be sick about." Locke toyed with the stock of his rifle as he spoke, running a broken thumb-nail along the nicks in it. There were perhaps a dozen, each one a human grave. The jungle concealed murder so easily; it almost seemed, in its cryptic fashion, to condone the crime.

Stumpf turned away from Locke and scanned the mute assembly. There were so many Indians here, he thought, and though he carried a pistol he was an inept marksman. Suppose they rushed Locke, Cherrick and himself? He would not survive. And yet, looking at the Indians, he could see no sign of aggression amongst them. Once they had been warriors; now? Like beaten children, sullen and willfully stupid. There was some trace of beauty in one or two of the younger women; their skins, though grimy, were fine, their eyes black. Had he felt more healthy he might have been aroused by their nakedness, tempted to press his hands upon their shiny bodies. As it was, their feigned incomprehension merely irritated him. They seemed, in their silence, like another species, as mysterious and unfathomable as mules or birds. Hadn't somebody in Uxituba told him that many of these people didn't even give their chil-

dren proper names? that each was like a limb of the tribe, anonymous and therefore unfixable? He could believe that now, meeting the same dark stare in each pair of eyes; could believe that what they faced here was not three dozen individuals but a fluid system of hatred made flesh. It made him shudder to think of it now.

Now, for the first time since their appearance, one of the assembly moved. He was an ancient, fully thirty years older than most of the tribe. He, like the rest, was all but naked. The sagging flesh of his limbs and breasts resembled tanned hide; his step, though the pale eyes suggested blindness, was perfectly confident. Once standing in front of the interlopers he opened his mouth — there were no teeth set in his rotted gums — and spoke. What emerged from his scraggy throat was not a language made of words, but only of sound; a pot-pourri of jungle noises. There was no discernible pattern to the outpouring, it was simply a display — awesome in its way — of impersonations. The man could murmur like a jaguar, screech like a parrot; he could find in his throat the splash of rain on orchids, the howl of monkeys.

The sounds made Stumpf's gorge rise. The jungle had diseased him, dehydrated him and left him wrung out. Now this rheumy-eyed stick-man was vomiting the whole odious place up at him. The raw heat in the circle of huts made Stumpf's head beat, and he was sure, as he stood listening to the sage's din, that the old man was measuring the rhythm of his nonsense to the thud at his temples and wrists.

"What's he saying?" Locke demanded.

"What does it sound like?" Stumpf replied, irritated by Locke's idiot questions. "It's all noises."

"The fucker's cursing us," Cherrick said.

Stumpf looked round at the third man. Cherrick's eyes were starting from his head.

"It's a curse," he said to Stumpf.

Locke laughed, unmoved by Cherrick's apprehension. He pushed Stumpf out of the way so as to face the old man, whose song-speech had now lowered in pitch; it was almost lilting. He was singing twilight, Stumpf thought: that brief ambiguity between the fierce day and the suffocating night. Yes, that was it. He could hear in the song the purr and the coo of a drowsy kingdom. It was so persuasive he wanted to lie down on the spot where he stood, and sleep.

Locke broke the spell. "What are you saying?" he spat in the tribesman's mazy face. "Talk sense!"

But the night-noises only whispered on, an unbroken stream.

"This is our village," another voice now broke in; the man spoke as if translating the elder's words. Locke snapped round to locate the speaker. He was a thin youth, whose skin might once have been golden. "Our village. Our land."

"You speak English," Locke said.

"Some," the youth replied.

"Why didn't you answer me earlier?" Locke demanded, his fury exacerbated by the disinterest on the Indian's face.

"Not my place to speak," the man replied. "He is the elder."

"The Chief, you mean?"

"The Chief is dead. All his family is dead. This is the wisest of us—"

"Then you tell him—"

"No need to tell," the young man broke in. "He understands you."

"He speaks English, too?"

"No," the other replied, "but he understands you. You are . . . transparent."

Locke half-grasped that the youth was implying an insult here, but wasn't quite certain. He gave Stumpf a puzzled look. The German shook his head. Locke returned his attention to the youth. "Tell him anyway," he said, "tell all of them. This is our land. We bought it."

"The tribe has always lived here," the reply came.

"Not any longer," Cherrick said.

"We've got papers—" Stumpf said mildly, still hoping that the confrontation might end peacefully, "—from the government."

"We were here before the government," the tribesman replied.

The old man had stopped talking to the forest. Perhaps, Stumpf thought, he's coming to the beginning of another day, and stopped. He was turning away now, indifferent to the presence of these unwelcome guests.

"Call him back," Locke demanded, stabbing his rifle toward the young tribesman. The gesture was unambiguous. "Make him tell the rest of them they've got to go."

The young man seemed unimpressed by the threat of Locke's rifle, however, and clearly unwilling to give orders to his elder, whatever the imperative. He simply watched the old man walk back toward the hut

from which he had emerged. Around the compound, others were also turning away. The old man's withdrawal apparently signalled that the show was over.

"No!" said Cherrick, "you're not *listening*." The color in his cheeks had risen a tone; his voice, an octave. He pushed forward, rifle raised. "You *fucking scum!*"

Despite his hysteria, he was rapidly losing his audience. The old man had reached the doorway of his hut, and now bent his back and disappeared into its recesses; the few members of the tribe who were still showing some interest in proceedings were viewing the Europeans with a hint of pity for their lunacy. It only enraged Cherrick further.

"Listen to me!" he shrieked, sweat flicking off his brow as he jerked his head at one retreating figure and then at another. "*Listen*, you bastards."

"Easy. . . ." said Stumpf.

The appeal triggered Cherrick. Without warning he raised his rifle to his shoulder, aimed at the open door of the hut into which the old man had vanished and fired. Birds rose from the crowns of adjacent trees; dogs took to their heels. From within the hut came a tiny shriek, not like the old man's voice at all. As it sounded, Stumpf fell to his knees, hugging his belly, his gut in spasm. Face to the ground, he did not see the diminutive figure emerge from the hut and totter into the sunlight. Even when he did look up, and saw how the child with the scarlet face clutched his belly, he hoped his eyes lied. But they did not. It was blood that came from between the child's tiny fingers, and death that had stricken his face. He fell forward on to the impacted earth of the hut's threshold, twitched, and died.

Somewhere amongst the huts a woman began to sob quietly. For a moment the world spun on a pin-head, balanced exquisitely between silence and the cry that must break it, between a truce held and the coming atrocity.

"You stupid bastard," Locke murmured to Cherrick. Under his condemnation, his voice trembled. "Back off," he said. "Get up, Stumpf. We're not waiting. Get up and come now, or don't come at all."

Stumpf was still looking at the body of the child. Suppressing his moans, he got to his feet.

"Help me," he said. Locke lent him an arm. "Cover us," he said to Cherrick.

The man nodded, deathly-pale. Some of the tribe had turned their gaze

on the Europeans' retreat, their expressions, despite this tragedy, as inscrutable as ever. Only the sobbing woman, presumably the dead child's mother, wove between the silent figures, keening her grief.

Cherrick's rifle shook as he kept the bridgehead. He'd done the mathematics; if it came to a head-on collision they had little chance of survival. But even now, with the enemy making a getaway, there was no sign of movement amongst the Indians. Just the accusing facts: the dead boy, the warm rifle. Cherrick chanced a look over his shoulder. Locke and Stumpf were already within twenty yards of the Jeep, and there was still no move from the savages.

Then, as he looked back toward the compound, it seemed as though the tribe breathed together one solid breath, and hearing that sound, Cherrick felt death wedge itself like a fish-bone in his throat, too deep to be plucked out by his fingers, too big to be shat. It was just waiting there, lodged in his anatomy, beyond argument or appeal. He was distracted from its presence by a movement at the door of the hut. Quite ready to make the same mistake again, he took firmer hold of his rifle. The old man had reappeared at the door. He stepped over the corpse of the boy, which was lying where it had toppled. Again, Cherrick glanced behind him. Surely they were at the Jeep? But Stumpf had stumbled; Locke was even now dragging him to his feet. Cherrick, seeing the old man advancing toward him, took one cautious step backward, followed by another. But the old man was fearless. He walked swiftly across the compound, coming to stand so close to Cherrick, his body as vulnerable as ever, that the barrel of the rifle prodded his shrunken belly.

There was blood on both his hands, fresh enough to run down the man's arms when he displayed the palms for Cherrick's benefit. Had he touched the boy, Cherrick wondered, as he stepped out of the hut? If so, it had been an astonishing sleight-of-hand, for Cherrick had seen nothing. Trick or no trick, the significance of the display was perfectly apparent: he was being accused of murder. Cherrick wasn't about to be cowed, however. He stared back at the old man, matching defiance with defiance.

But the old bastard did nothing, except show his bloody palms, his eyes full of tears. Cherrick could feel his anger growing again. He poked the man's flesh with his finger.

"You don't frighten me," he said, "you understand? I'm not a fool."

As he spoke he seemed to see a shifting in the old man's features. It

was a trick of the sun, of course, or of bird-shadow, but there was, beneath the corruption of age, a hint of the child now dead at the hut door: the tiny mouth even seemed to smile. Then, as subtly as it had appeared, the illusion faded again.

Cherrick withdrew his hand from the old man's chest, narrowing his eyes against further images. He then renewed his retreat. He had taken three steps only when something broke cover to his left. He swung round, raised his rifle and fired. A piebald pig, one of several that had been grazing around the huts, was checked in its flight by the bullet, which struck it in the neck. It seemed to trip over itself, and collapsed headlong in the dust.

Cherrick swung his rifle back toward the old man. But he hadn't moved, except to open his mouth. His palate was making the sound of the dying pig. A choking squeal, pitiful and ridiculous, which followed Cherrick back up the path to the Jeep. Locke had the engine running. "Get in," he said. Cherrick needed no encouragement, but flung himself into the front seat. The interior of the vehicle was filthy hot, and stank of Stumpf's bodily functions, but it was as near safety as they'd been in the last hour.

"It was a pig," he said. "I shot a pig."

"I saw," said Locke.

"That old bastard. . . ."

He didn't finish. He was looking down at the two fingers with which he had prodded the elder. "I touched him," he murmured, perplexed by what he saw. The finger-tips were bloody, though the flesh he had laid his fingers upon had been clean.

Locke ignored Cherrick's confusion and backed the Jeep up to turn it around, then drove away from the hamlet, down a track that seemed to have become choked with foliage in the hour since they'd come up it. There was no discernible pursuit.

THE TINY trading post to the south of Averio was scant of civilization, but it sufficed. There were white faces here, and clean water. Stumpf, whose condition had deteriorated on the return journey, was treated by Dancy, an Englishman who had the manner of a disenfranchised Earl and a face like hammered steak. He claimed to have been a doctor once upon a sober time, and though he had no evidence of his qualifications, nobody contested his right to deal with

Stumpf. The German was delirious, and on occasion violent, but Dancy, his small hands heavy with gold rings, seemed to take a positive delight in nursing his thrashing patient.

While Stumpf raved beneath his mosquito net, Locke and Cherrick sat in the lamp-lit gloom and drank, then told the story of their encounter with the tribe. It was Tetelman, the owner of the trading post's stores, who had most to say when the report was finished. He knew the Indians well.

"I've been here for years," he said, feeding nuts to the mangy monkey that scampered on his lap. "I know the way these people think. They may act as though they're stupid, cowards even. Take it from me, they're neither."

Cherrick grunted. The quicksilver monkey fixed him with vacant eyes. "They didn't make a move on us," Cherrick said, "even though they outnumbered us ten to one. If that isn't cowardice, what is it?"

Tetelman settled back in his creaking chair, throwing the animal off his lap. His face was raddled and used. Only his lips, constantly rewetted from his glass, had any color; he looked, thought Locke, like an old whore. "Thirty years ago," Tetelman said, "this whole territory was their homeland. Nobody wanted it; they *went* where they liked, *did* what they liked. As far as we whites were concerned the jungle was filthy and disease-infected: we wanted no part of it. And, of course, in some ways we were right. It is filthy and disease-infected; but it's also got reserves we now want badly: minerals, oil maybe: power."

"We paid for that land," said Locke, his fingers jittery on the cracked rim of his glass. "It's all we've got now."

Tetelman sneered. "Paid?" he said. The monkey chattered at his feet, apparently as amused by this claim as its master. "No. You just paid for a blind eye, so you could take it by force. You paid the right to fuck up the Indians in any way you could. That's what your dollars bought, Mr. Locke. The government of this country is counting off the months until every tribe on the sub-continent is wiped out by you or your like. It's no use to play the outraged innocents. I've been here too long. . . ."

Cherrick spat on the bare floor. Tetelman's speech had heated his blood.

"And so why'd you come here, if you're so fucking clever?" he asked the trader.

"Same reason as you," Tetelman replied plainly, staring into the trees beyond the plot of land behind the store. Their silhouettes shook against the sky; wind, or night-birds.

"What reason's that?" Cherrick said, barely keeping his hostility in check.

"Greed," Tetelman replied mildly, still watching the trees. Something scampered across the low wooden roof. The monkey at Tetelman's feet listened, head cocked. "I thought I could make my fortune out here, the same way you do. I gave myself two years. Three at the most. That was the best part of two decades ago." He frowned; whatever thoughts passed behind his eyes, they were bitter. "The jungle eats you up and spits you out, sooner or later."

"Not me," said Locke.

Tetelman turned his eyes on the man. They were wet. "Oh yes," he said politely. "Extinction's in the air, Mr. Locke. I can smell it." Then he turned back to looking at the window.

Whatever was on the roof now had companions.

"They won't come here, will they?" said Cherrick. "They won't follow us?"

The question, spoken almost in a whisper, begged for a reply in the negative. Try as he might, Cherrick couldn't dislodge the sights of the previous day. It wasn't the boy's corpse that so haunted him; that he could soon learn to forget. But the elder — with his shifting, sunlit face, and the palms raised as if to display some stigmata — he was not so forgettable.

"Don't fret," Tetelman said, with a trace of condescension. "Sometimes one or two of them will drift in here with a parrot to sell, or a few pots, but I've never seen them come here in any numbers. They don't like it. This is civilization as far as they're concerned, and it intimidates them. Besides, they wouldn't harm my guests. They need me."

"Need you?" said Locke; who could need this wreck of a man?

"They use our medicines. Dancy supplies them. And blankets, once in a while. As I said, they're not so stupid."

Next door, Stumpf had begun to howl. Dancy's consoling voice could be heard, attempting to talk down the panic. He was plainly failing.

"Your friend's gone bad," said Tetelman.

"No friend," Cherrick replied.

"It rots," Tetelman murmured, half to himself.

"What does?"

"The soul." The word was utterly out of place from Tetelman's whisky-glossed lips. "It's like fruit, you see. It rots."

Somehow Stumpf's cries gave force to the observation. It was not the voice of a wholesome creature; there was putrescence in it.

More to direct his attention away from the German's din than out of any real interest, Cherrick said: "What do they give you for the medicine and the blankets? Women?"

The possibility clearly entertained Tetelman; he laughed, his gold teeth gleaming. "I've no use for women," he said. "I had the syph for too many years." He clicked his fingers and the monkey clambered back up on to his lap. "The soul," he said, "isn't the only thing that rots."

"Well, what do you get from them then?" Locke said. "For the supplies?"

"Artifacts," Tetelman replied. "Bowls, jugs, mats. The Americans buy them off me, and sell them again in Manhattan. Everybody wants something made by an extinct tribe these days. *Memento mori*."

"Extinct?" said Locke. The word had a seductive ring; it sounded like life to him.

"Oh certainly," said Tetelman. "They're as good as gone. If you don't wipe them out, they'll do it themselves."

"Suicide?" Locke said.

"In their fashion. They just lose heart. I've seen it happen half a dozen times. A tribe loses its land, and its appetite for life goes with it. They stop taking care of themselves. The women don't get pregnant anymore; the young men take to drink, the old men just starve themselves to death. In a year or two it's like they never existed."

Locke swallowed the rest of his drink, silently saluting the fatal wisdom of these people. They knew when to die, which was more than could be said for some he'd met. The thought of their deathwish absolved him of any last vestiges of guilt. What was his gun, except an instrument of evolution?

On the fourth day after their arrival at the post, Stumpf's fever abated, much to Dancy's disappointment. "The worst of it's over," he announced. "Give him two more days' rest and you can get back to your labors."

"What are your plans?" Tetelman wanted to know.

Locke was watching the rain from the veranda. Sheets of water pouring from clouds so low they brushed the tree-tops. Then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, the downpour was gone, as if a tap had been turned off. Sun broke through; the jungle, new-washed, was steaming, and sprouting, and thriving again.

"I don't know what we'll do," said Locke. "Maybe get ourselves some help and go back in there."

"There are ways," Tetelman said.

Cherrick, sitting beside the door to get the benefit of what little breeze was available, picked up the glass that had scarcely been out of his hand in recent days, and filled it up again. "No more guns," he said. He hadn't touched his rifle since they'd arrived at the post; in fact he kept from contact with anything but a bottle and his bed. His skin seemed to crawl and creep perpetually.

"No need for guns," Tetelman murmured. That statement hung on the air like an unfulfilled promise.

"Get rid of them without guns?" said Locke. "If you mean waiting for them to die out naturally, I'm not that patient."

"No," said Tetelman, "we can be swifter than that."

"How?"

Tetelman gave the man a lazy look. "They're my livelihood," he said, "or part of it. You're asking me to help you make myself bankrupt."

He not only looks like an old whore, Locke thought, he thinks like one. "What's it worth? Your wisdom?" he asked.

"A cut of whatever you find on your land," Tetelman replied.

Locke nodded. "What have we got to lose? Cherrick? You agree to cut him in?" Cherrick's consent was a shrug. "All right," Locke said, "talk."

"They need medicines," Tetelman explained, "because they're so susceptible to our diseases. A decent plague can wipe them out practically overnight."

Locke thought about this, not looking at Tetelman. "One fell swoop," Tetelman continued. "They've got practically no defenses against certain bacteria. Never had to build up any resistance. The clap. Smallpox. Even measles."

"How?" said Locke.

Another silence. Down the steps of the veranda, where civilization finished, the jungle was swelling to meet the sun. In the liquid heat, plants blossomed and rotted and blossomed again.

"I asked *how*!" Locke said.

"Blankets," Tetelman replied, "dead men's blankets."

A little before the dawn of the night after Stumpf's recovery, Cherrick

woke suddenly, startled from his rest by bad dreams. Outside, it was pitchdark; neither moon nor stars relieved the depth of the night. But his body-clock, which his life as a mercenary had trained to impressive accuracy, told him that first light was not far off, and he had no wish to lay his head down again and sleep. Not with the old man waiting to be dreamed. It wasn't just the raised palms, the blood glistening, that so distressed Cherrick. It was the words he'd dreamed coming from the old man's toothless mouth which had brought on the cold sweat that now encased his body.

What were the words? He couldn't recall them now, but wanted to; wanted the sentiments dragged into wakefulness, where they could be dissected and dismissed as ridiculous. They wouldn't come though. He lay on his wretched cot, the dark wrapping him up too tightly for him to move, and suddenly the bloody hands were there, in front of him, suspended in the pitch. There was no face, no sky, no tribe. Just the hands.

"Dreaming," Cherrick told himself, but he knew better.

And now, the voice. He was getting his wish; here were the words he had dreamed spoken. Few of them made sense. Cherrick lay like a new-born baby, listening to its parents talk but unable to make any significance of their exchanges. He was ignorant wasn't he? He tasted the sourness of his stupidity for the first time since childhood. The voice made him fearful of ambiguities he had ridden roughshod over, of whispers his shouting life had rendered inaudible. He fumbled for comprehension, and was not entirely frustrated. The man was speaking of the world, and of exile from the world; of being broken always by what one seeks to possess. Cherrick struggled, wishing he could stop the voice and ask for an explanation. But it was already fading, ushered away by the wild address of parrots in the trees, raucous and gaudy voices erupting suddenly on every side. Through the mesh of Cherrick's mosquito net, he could see the sky flaring through the branches.

He sat up. Hands and voice had gone; and with them all but an irritating murmur of what he had almost understood. He had thrown off in sleep his single sheet; now he looked down at his body with distaste. His back and buttocks, and the underside of his thighs, felt sore. Too much sweating on coarse sheets, he thought. Not for the first time in recent days he remembered a small house in Bristol which he had once known as home.

The noise of birds was filling his head. He hauled himself to the edge of the bed and pulled back the mosquito net. The crude weave of the net

seemed to scour the palm of his hand as he gripped it. He disengaged his hold, and cursed to himself. There was again today an itch of tenderness in his skin that he'd suffered since coming to the post. Even the soles of his feet, pressed on to the floor by the weight of his body, seemed to suffer each knot and splinter. He wanted to be away from this place, and badly.

A warm trickle across his wrist caught his attention, and he was startled to see a rivulet of blood moving down his arm from his hand. There was a cut in the cushion of his thumb, where the mosquito net had apparently nicked his flesh. It was bleeding, though not copiously. He sucked at the cut, feeling again that peculiar sensitivity to touch that only drink, and that in abundance, dulled. Spitting out blood, he began to dress.

The clothes he put on were a scourge to his back. His sweat-stiffened shirt rubbed against his shoulders and neck; he seemed to feel every thread chafing his nerve-endings. The shirt might have been sack-cloth, the way it abraded him.

Next door, he heard Locke moving around. Gingerly finishing his dressing, Cherrick went through to join him. Locke was sitting at the table by the window. He was poring over a map of Tetelman's, and drinking a cup of the bitter coffee Dancy was so fond of brewing, which he drank with a dollop of condensed milk. The two men had little to say to each other. Since the incident in the village all pretense to respect or friendship had disappeared. Locke now showed undisguised contempt for his sometime companion. The only fact that kept them together was the contract they and Stumpf had signed. Rather than breakfast on whisky, which he knew Locke would take as a further sign of his decay, Cherrick poured himself a slug of Dancy's emetic and went out to look at the morning.

He felt strange. There was something about this dawning day which made him profoundly uneasy. He knew the dangers of courting unfounded fears, and he tried to forbid them, but they were incontestable.

Was it simply exhaustion that made him so painfully conscious of his many discomforts this morning? Why else did he feel the pressure of his stinking clothes so acutely? The rasp of his boot collar against the jutting bone of his ankle, the rhythmical chafing of his trousers against his inside leg as he walked, even the grazing air that eddied around his exposed face and arms. The world was pressing on him — at least that was the sensation — pressing as though it wanted him out.

A large dragonfly, whining toward him on iridescent wings, collided with his arm. The pain of the collision caused him to drop his mug. It didn't break, but rolled off the veranda and was lost in the undergrowth. Angered, Cherrick slapped the insect off, leaving a smear of blood on his tattooed forearm to mark the dragonfly's demise. He wiped it off. It welled up again on the same spot, full and dark.

It wasn't the blood of the insect, he realized, but his own. The dragonfly had cut him somehow, though he had felt nothing. Irritated, he peered more closely at his punctured skin. The wound was not significant, but it was painful.

From inside he could hear Locke talking. He was loudly describing the inadequacy of his fellow adventurers to Tetelman.

"Stumpf's not fit for this kind of work," he was saying. "And Cherrick —"

"What about me?"

Cherrick stepped into the shabby interior, wiping a new flow of blood from his arm.

Locke didn't even bother to look up at him. "You're paranoid," he said plainly. "Paranoid and unreliable."

Cherrick was in no mood for taking Locke's foul-mouthing. "Just because I killed some Indian brat," he said. The more he brushed blood from his bitten arm, the more the place stung. "You just didn't have the balls to do it yourself."

Locke still didn't bother to look up from his perusal of the map. Cherrick moved across to the table.

"Are you listening to me?" he demanded, and added force to his question by slamming his fist down on to the table. On impact his hand simply burst open. Blood spurted out in every direction, spattering the map.

Cherrick howled, and reeled backward from the table with blood pouring from a yawning split in the side of his hand. The bone showed. Through the din of pain in his head he could hear a quiet voice. The words were inaudible, but he knew whose they were.

"I won't hear!" he said, shaking his head like a dog with a flea in its ear. He staggered back against the wall, but the briefest of contacts was another agony. "I won't hear, damn you!"

"What the hell's he talking about?" Dancy had appeared in the doorway, woken by the cries, still clutching the *Complete Works of Shelley*

Tetelman had said he could not sleep without.

Locke readdressed the question to Cherrick, who was standing, wild-eyed, in the corner of the room, blood spitting from between his fingers as he attempted to staunch his wounded hand. "What are you saying?"

"He spoke to me," Cherrick replied. "The old man."

"What old man?" Tetelman asked.

"He means at the village," Locke said. Then, to Cherrick: "Is that what you mean?"

"He wants us out. Exiles. Like them. *Like them!*" Cherrick's panic was rapidly rising out of anyone's control, least of all his own.

"The man's got heat-stroke," Dancy said, ever the diagnostician. Locke knew better.

"Your hand needs bandaging. . . ." he said, slowly approaching Cherrick.

"I heard him. . . ." Cherrick muttered.

"I believe you. Just slow down. We can sort it out."

"No," the other man replied. "It's pushing us out. Everything we touch. Everything we touch."

He looked as though he was about to topple over, and Locke reached for him. As his hands made contact with Cherrick's shoulders, the flesh beneath the shirt split, and Locke's hands were instantly soaked in scarlet. He withdrew them, appalled. Cherrick fell to his knees, which in their turn became new wounds. He stared down as his shirt and trousers darkened. "What's happening to me?" he wept.

Dancy moved toward him. "Let me help."

"No! Don't touch me!" Cherrick pleaded, but Dancy wasn't to be denied his nursing.

"It's all right," he said in his best bedside manner.

It wasn't. Dancy's grip, intended only to lift the man from his bleeding knees, opened new cuts where he took hold. Dancy felt the blood sprout beneath his hand, felt the flesh slip away from the bone. The sensation bested even his taste for agony. Like Locke, he forsook the lost man.

"He's rotting," he murmured.

Cherrick's body had split now in a dozen or more places. He tried to stand, half staggering to his feet only to collapse again, his flesh breaking open whenever he touched wall or chair or floor. There was no help for him. All the others could do was stand around like spectators at an execution, awaiting the final throes. Even Stumpf had roused himself from his

bed and come through to see what all the shouting was about. He stood leaning against the door-lintel, his disease-thinned face all disbelief.

Another minute, and blood-loss defeated Cherrick. He keeled over and sprawled, face down, across the floor. Dancy crossed back to him and crouched on his haunches beside Cherrick's head.

"Is he dead?" Locke asked.

"Almost," Dancy replied.

"Rotted," said Tetelman, as though the word explained the atrocity they had just witnessed. He had a crucifix in his hand, large and crudely carved. It looked like Indian handiwork, Locke thought. The Messiah impaled on the tree was sloe-eyed and indecently naked. He smiled, despite nail and thorn.

Dancy touched Cherrick's body, letting the blood come with this touch, and turned the man over, then leaned in toward Cherrick's jittering face. The dying man's lips were moving, oh so slightly.

"What are you saying?" Dancy asked; he leaned closer still to catch the man's words. Cherrick's mouth trailed bloody spittle, but no sound came.

Locke stepped in, pushing Dancy aside. Flies were already flitting around Cherrick's face. Locke thrust his bull-necked head into Cherrick's view. "You hear me?"

The body grunted.

"You know me?"

Again, a grunt.

"You want to give me your share of the land?"

The grunt was lighter this time; almost a sigh.

"There're witnesses here," Locke said. "Just say yes. They'll hear you. Just say yes."

The body was trying its best. It opened its mouth a little wider.

"Dancy—" said Locke. "You hear what he said?"

Dancy could not disguise his horror at Locke's insistence, but he nodded.

"You're a witness."

"If you must," said the Englishman.

Deep in his body Cherrick felt the fish-bone he'd first choked on in the village twist itself about one final time, and extinguish him.

"Did he say yes, Dancy?" Tetelman asked.

Dancy felt the physical proximity of the brute kneeling beside him.

He didn't know what the dead man had said, but what did it matter? Locke would have the land anyway, wouldn't he?

"He said yes."

Locke stood up, and went in search of a fresh cup of coffee.

Without thinking, Dancy put his fingers on Cherrick's lids to seal his empty gaze. Under that lightest of touches the lids broke open, and blood tainted the tears that had swelled where Cherrick's sight had been.

They had buried him toward evening. The corpse, though it had lain through the noon-heat in the coolest part of the store, amongst the dried goods, had begun to putrefy by the time it was sewn up in canvas for the burial. The night following, Stumpf had come to Locke and offered him the last third of the territory to add to Cherrick's share, and Locke, ever the realist, had accepted. The terms, which were punitive, had been worked out the next day. In the evening of that day, as Stumpf had hoped, the supply plane came in. Locke, bored with Tetelman's contemptuous looks, had also elected to fly back to Santarem, there to drink the jungle out of his system for a few days, and return refreshed. He intended to buy up fresh supplies, and, if possible, hire a reliable driver and gunman.

The flight was noisy, cramped and tedious; the two men exchanged no words for its full duration. Stumpf just kept his eyes on the tracts of unfelled wilderness they passed over, though from one hour to the next the scene scarcely changed. A panorama of sable green, broken on occasion by a glint of water; perhaps a column of blue smoke rising here and there, where land was being cleared; little else.

At Santarem they parted with a single handshake which left every nerve in Stumpf's hand scourged, and an open cut in the tender flesh between index finger and thumb.

SANTAREM WASN'T Rio, Locke mused as he made his way down to the bar at the south end of the town, run by a veteran of Vietnam who had a taste for ad hoc animal shows. It was one of Locke's few certain pleasures, and one he never tired of, to watch a local woman, face dead as a cold manioc cake, submit to a dog or a donkey for a few grubby dollar bills. The women of Santarem were, on the whole, as unpalatable as the beer, but Locke had no eye for beauty in the opposite sex: it mattered only that their bodies be in reasonable working order, and not diseased. He found the bar, and settled down for an evening

exchanging dirt with the American. When he tired of that — sometime after midnight — he bought a bottle of whiskey and went out looking for a face to press his heat upon.

The woman with the squint was about to accede to a particular peccadillo of Locke's — one which she had resolutely refused until drunkenness persuaded her to abandon what little hope of dignity she had — when there came a rap on the door.

"Fuck," said Locke.

"Si," said the woman. "Fook. Fook." It seemed to be the only word she knew in anything resembling English. Locke ignored her and crawled drunkenly to the edge of the stained mattress. Again, the rap on the door.

"Who is it?" he said.

"Senhor Locke?" The voice from the hallway was that of a young boy.

"Yes?" said Locke. His trousers had become lost in the tangle of sheets. "Yes? What do you want?"

"Mensagem," the boy said. "*Urgente. Urgente.*"

"For me?" He had found his trousers and was pulling them on. The woman, not at all disgruntled by this desertion, watched him from the head of the bed, toying with an empty bottle. Buttoning up, Locke crossed from bed to door, a matter of three steps. He unlocked it. The boy in the darkened hallway was of Indian extraction to judge by the blackness of his eyes, and that particular luster his skin owned. He was dressed in a T-shirt bearing the Coca-Cola motif.

"Mensagem, Senhor Locke," he said again, "... *do hospital.*"

The boy was staring past Locke at the woman on the bed. He grinned from ear to ear at her cavortings.

"Hospital?" said Locke.

"Sim. Hospital 'Sacrado Coraçã de Maria'."

It could only be Stumpf, Locke thought. Who else did he know in this corner of Hell who'd call upon him? Nobody. He looked down at the leering child.

"Vem comigo," the boy said, "*vem comigo. Urgente.*"

"No," said Locke. "I'm not coming. Not now. You understand? Later. Later."

The boy shrugged. "... *Tã morrendo,*" he said.

"Dying?" said Locke.

"Sim. Tã morrendo."

"Well, let him. Understand me? You go back and tell him I won't come until I'm ready."

Again the boy shrugged. "*E meu dinheiro!*" he said, as Locke went to close the door.

"You go to Hell," Locke replied, and slammed it in the child's face.

When, two hours and one ungainly act of passionless sex later, Locke unlocked the door, he discovered that the child, by way of revenge, had defecated on the threshold.

The hospital 'Sacrado Coraçã de Maria' was no place to fall ill; better, thought Locke, as he made his way down the dingy corridors, to die in your own bed with your own sweat for company than come here. The stench of disinfectant could not entirely mask the odor of human pain. The walls were ingrained with it; it formed a grease on the lamps, it slickened the unwashed floors. What had happened to Stumpf to bring him here? A bar-room brawl, an argument with a pimp about the price of a woman? The German was just damn fool enough to get himself stuck in the gut over something so petty. "*Senhor Stumpf?*" he asked of a woman in white he accosted in the corridor. "I'm looking for *Senhor Stumpf*."

The woman shook her head and pointed toward a harried-looking man farther down the corridor, who was taking a moment to light a small cigar. Locke let go the nurse's arm and approached the fellow. He was enveloped in a stinking cloud of smoke.

"I'm looking for *Senhor Stumpf*," Locke said.

The man peered at him quizzically.

"You are Locke?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Ah." He drew on the cigar. The pungency of the expelled smoke would surely have brought on a relapse in the hardiest person. "I'm Doctor Edson Costa," the man said, offering his clammy hand to Locke. "Your friend has been waiting for you to come all night."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's hurt his eye," Edson Costa replied, clearly indifferent to Stumpf's condition. "And he has some minor abrasions on his hands and face. But he won't have anyone go near him. He doctored himself."

"Why?" Locke asked.

The doctor looked flummoxed. "He pays to go in a clean room. Pays plenty. So I put him in. You want to see him? Maybe take him away?"

"Maybe," said Locke unenthusiastically.

"His head. . . ." said the doctor. "He has delusions."

Without offering further explanation, the man led off at a considerable rate, trailing tobacco smoke as he went. The route, which wound out of the main building and across the small internal courtyard, ended at a room with a glass partition in the door.

"Here," said the doctor. "Your friend. You tell him," he said as a parting snipe, "he pays more, or tomorrow he leaves."

Locke peered through the glass partition. The grubby-white room was empty, but for a bed and small table, lit by the same dingy light that cursed every wretched inch of this establishment. Stumpf was not on the bed, but squatting on the floor in the corner of the room. His left eye was covered with a bulbous padding, held in place by a bandage ineptly wrapped around his head.

Locke was looking at the man for a good time before Stumpf sensed that he was being watched. He looked up slowly. His good eye, as if in compensation for the loss of its companion, seemed to have swollen to twice its natural size. It held enough fear for both it and its twin; indeed enough for a dozen eyes.

Cautiously, like a man whose bones are so brittle he fears an injudicious breath will shatter them, Stumpf edged up the wall and crossed to the door. He did not open it, but addressed Locke through the glass.

"Why didn't you come?" he asked.

"I'm here."

"But *sooner*," said Stumpf. His face was raw, as if he'd been beaten. "Sooner."

"I had business," Locke returned. "What happened to you?"

"It's true, Locke," the German said, "everything is true."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tetelman told me. Cherrick's babblings. About being exiles. It's true. They mean to drive us out."

"We're not in the jungle now," Locke said. "You've got nothing to be afraid of here."

"Oh yes," said Stumpf, that wide eye wider than ever. "Oh yes! I saw him —"

"Who?"

"The elder. From the village. He was here."

"Ridiculous."

"*He was here*, damn you," Stumpf replied. "He was standing where you're standing. Looking at me through the glass."

"You've been drinking too much."

"It happened to Cherrick, and now it's happening to me. They're making it impossible to live —"

Locke snorted. "I'm not having any problem," he said.

"They won't let you escape," Stumpf said. "None of us'll escape. Not unless we make amends."

"You've got to vacate the room," Locke said, unwilling to countenance any more of this drivel. "I've been told you've got to get out by morning."

"No," said Stumpf. "I can't leave. I can't leave."

"There's nothing to fear."

"The dust," said the German. "The dust in the air. It'll cut me up. I got a speck in my eye — just a *speck* — and the next thing my eye's bleeding as though it'll never stop. I can't hardly lie down, the sheet's like a bed of nails. The soles of my feet feel as if they're going to split. You've got to help me."

"How?" said Locke.

"Pay them for the room. Pay them so I can stay till you can get a specialist from Sao Luis. Then go back to the village, Locke. Go back and tell them. I don't want the land. Tell them I don't own it any longer."

"I'll go back," said Locke, "but in my good time."

"You must go *quickly*," said Stumpf. "Tell them to let me be."

Suddenly, the expression on the partially-masked face changed, and Stumpf looked past Locke at some spectacle down the corridor. From his mouth, slack with fear, came the small word, "Please."

Locke, mystified by the man's expression, turned. The corridor was empty, except for the fat moths that were besetting the bulb. "There's nothing there —" he said, turning back to the door of Stumpf's room. The wire-mesh glass of the window bore the distinct imprint of two bloody palms.

"He's here," the German was saying, staring fixedly at the miracle of the bleeding glass. Locke didn't need to ask who. He raised his hand to touch the marks. The handprints, still wet, were on *his* side of the glass, not Stumpf's.

"My God," he breathed. How could anyone have slipped between him and the door and laid the prints there, sliding away again in the brief moment it had taken him to glance behind him? It defied reason. Again he looked back down the corridor. It was still bereft of visitors. Just the bulb — swinging slightly, as if a breeze of passage had caught it — and the moth's wings, whispering. "What's happening?" Locke breathed.

Stumpf, entranced by the handprints, touched his fingertips lightly to the glass. On contact, his fingers blossomed blood, trails of which idled down the glass. He didn't remove his fingers, but stared through at Locke with despair in his eye.

"See?" he said, very quietly.

"What are you playing at?" Locke said, his voice similarly hushed. "This is some kind of trick."

"No."

"You haven't got Cherrick's disease. You can't have. You didn't touch them. We *agreed*, damn you," he said, more heatedly. "Cherrick touched them, we *didn't*."

Stumpf looked back at Locke with something close to pity on his face.

"We were wrong," he said gently. His fingers, which he now removed from the glass, continued to bleed, dribbling across the backs of his hands and down his arms. "This isn't something you can beat into submission, Locke. It's out of our hands." He raised his bloody fingers, smiling at his own word-play: "See?" he said.

The German's sudden, fatalistic calm frightened Locke. He reached for the handle of the door, and jiggled it. The room was locked. The key was on the inside, where Stumpf had paid for it to be.

"Keep out," Stumpf said. "Keep away from me."

His smile vanished. Locke put his shoulder to the door.

"Keep out, I said," Stumpf shouted, his voice shrill. He backed away from the door as Locke took another lunge at it. Then, seeing that the lock must soon give, he raised a cry of alarm. Locke took no notice, but continued to throw himself at the door. There came the sound of wood beginning to splinter.

Somewhere nearby, Locke heard a woman's voice, raised in response to Stumpf's calls. No matter; he'd have his hands on the German before help could come, and then, by Christ, he'd wipe every last vestige of a smile from the bastard's lips. He threw himself against the door with increased

fervor; again, and again. The door gave.

In the antiseptic cocoon of his room, Stumpf felt the first blast of unclean air from the outside world. It was no more than a light breeze that invaded his makeshift sanctuary, but it bore upon its back the debris of the world. Soot and seeds, flakes of skin itched off a thousand scalps, fluff and sand and twists of hair; the bright dust from a moth's wing. Motes so small the human eye glimpsed them only in a shaft of white sunlight; each a tiny, whirling speck quite harmless to most living organisms. But this cloud was lethal to Stumpf; in seconds his body became a field of tiny, seeping wounds.

He screeched, and ran toward the door to slam it closed again, flinging himself into a hail of minute razors, each lacerating him. Pressing against the door to prevent Locke from entering, his wounded hands erupted. He was too late to keep Locke out anyhow. The man had pushed the door wide, as was now stepping through, his every movement setting up further currents of air to cut Stumpf down. He snatched hold of the German's wrist. At his grip the skin opened as if beneath a knife.

Behind him, a woman loosed a cry of horror. Locke, realizing that Stumpf was past recanting his laughter, let the man go. Adorned with cuts on every exposed part of his body, and gaining more by the moment, Stumpf stumbled back, blind, and fell beside the bed. The killing air still sliced him as he sank down; with each agonized shudder he woke new eddies and whirlpools to open him up.

Ashen, Locke retreated from where the body lay and staggered out into the corridor. A gaggle of onlookers blocked it; they parted, however, at his approach, too intimidated by his bulk and by the wild look on his face to challenge him. He retraced his steps through the sickness-perfumed maze, crossing the small courtyard and returning into the main building. He briefly caught sight of Edson Costa hurrying in pursuit, but did not linger for explanations.

In the vestibule, which, despite the late hour was busy with victims of one kind or another, his harried gaze alighted on a small boy, perched on his mother's lap. He had injured his belly apparently. His shirt, which was too large for him, was stained with blood; his face with tears. The mother did not look up as Locke moved through the throng. The child did however. He raised his head as if knowing that Locke was about to pass by, and smiled radiantly.

* * *

THERE WAS nobody Locke knew at Tetelman's store; and all the information he could bully from the hired hands, most of whom were drunk to the point of being unable to stand, was that their masters had gone off into the jungle the previous day. Locke chased the most sober of them and persuaded him with threats to accompany him back to the village as translator. Locke had no real idea of how he would make his peace with the tribe. He was only certain that he had to argue his innocence. After all, he would plead, it hadn't been *he* who had fired the killing shot. There had been misunderstandings, to be certain, but he had not harmed the people in any way. How could they, in all conscience, conspire to hurt him? If they should require some penance of him he was not above acceding to their demands. Indeed, might not there be some satisfaction in the act? *He had seen so much suffering of late.* He wanted to be cleansed of it. Anything they asked, within reason, he would comply with; anything to avoid dying like the others. He'd even give back the land.

It was a rough ride, and his morose companion complained often and incoherently. Locked turned a deaf ear. There was no time for loitering. Their noisy progress, the Jeep engine complaining at every new acrobatic required of it, brought the jungle alive on every side, a repertoire of wails, whoops and screeches. It was an urgent, hungry place, Locke thought; and for the first time since setting foot on this sub-continent he loathed it with all his heart. There was no room here to make sense of events; the best that could be hoped was that one be allowed a niche to breathe awhile between one squalid flowering and the next.

Half an hour before night-fall, exhausted by the journey, they came to the outskirts of the village. The place had altered not at all in the meager days since he'd last been here, but the ring of huts was clearly deserted. The doors gaped; the communal fires, always alight, were ashes. There was neither child nor pig to turn an eye toward him as he moved across the compound. When he reached the center of the ring he stood still, looking about him for some clue as to what had happened there. He found none, however. Fatigue made him foolhardy. Mustering his fractured strength, he shouted into the hush:

"Where are you!"

Two bright red macaws, finger-winged, rose screeching from the trees on the far side of the village. A few moments after, a figure emerged from the thicket of balsa and jacaranda. It was not one of the tribe, but Dancy. He paused before stepping fully into sight; then, recognizing Locke, a broad smile broke his face, and he advanced into the compound. Behind him, the foliage shook as others made their way through it. Tetelman was there, as were several Norwegians, led by a man called Bjornstrom, whom Locke had encountered briefly at the trading post. His face, beneath a shock of sun-bleached hair, was like cooked lobster.

"My God," said Tetelman, "what are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same question," Locke replied testily.

Bjornstrom waved down the raised rifles of his three companions and strode forward, bearing a placatory smile.

"Mr. Locke," the Norwegian said, extending a leather-gloved hand. "It is good we meet."

Locke looked down at the stained glove with disgust, and Bjornstrom, flashing a self-admonishing look, pulled it off. The hand beneath was pristine.

"My apologies," he said. "We've been working."

"At what?" Locke asked, the acid in his stomach edging its way up into the back of his throat.

Tetelman spat. "Indians," he said.

"Where's the tribe?" Locke said.

Again, Tetelman: "Bjornstrom claims he's got rights to this territory. . . ."

"The tribe," Locke insisted. "Where are they?"

The Norwegian toyed with his glove.

"Did you buy them out, or what?" Locke asked.

"Not exactly," Bjornstrom replied. His English, like his profile, was impeccable.

"Bring him along," Dancy suggested with some enthusiasm. "Let him see for himself."

Bjornstrom nodded. "Why not?" he said. "Don't touch anything, Mr. Locke. And tell your carrier to stay where he is."

Dancy had already about turned and was heading into the thicket; now Bjornstrom did the same, escorting Locke across the compound toward a corridor hacked through the heavy foliage. Locke could scarcely keep

pace; his limbs were more reluctant with every step he took. The ground had been heavily trodden along this track. A litter of leaves and orchid blossoms had been mashed into the sodden soil.

They had dug a pit in a small clearing no more than a hundred yards from the compound. It was not deep, this pit, nor was it very large. The mingled smells of lime and gasoline cancelled out any other scent.

Tetelman, who had reached the clearing ahead of Locke, hung back from approaching the lip of the earthworks, but Dancy was not so fastidious. He strode around the far side of the pit and beckoned to Locke to view the contents.

The tribe was putrefying already. They lay where they had been thrown, in a jumble of breasts and buttocks and faces and limbs, their bodies tinged here and there with purple and black. Flies built helter-skelters in the air above them.

"An education," Dancy commented.

Locke just looked on as Bjornstrom moved around the other side of the pit to join Dancy.

"All of them?" Locke asked.

The Norwegian nodded. "One fell swoop," he said, pronouncing each word with unsettling precision.

"Blankets," said Tetelman, naming the murder weapon.

"But so quickly. . . ." Locke murmured.

"It's very efficient," said Dancy. "And difficult to prove. Even if anybody ever asks."

"Disease is natural," Bjornstrom observed. "Yes? Like the trees."

Locke slowly shook his head, his eyes pricking.

"I hear good things of you," Bjornstrom said to him. "Perhaps we can work together."

Locke didn't even attempt to reply. Others of the Norwegian party had laid down their rifles and were now getting back to work, moving the few bodies still to be pitched amongst their fellows from the forlorn heap beside the pit. Locke could see a child amongst the tangle, and an old man, whom even now the burial party was picking up. The corpse looked jointless as they swung it over the edge of the hole. It tumbled down the shallow incline and came to rest face up, its arms flung up to either side of its head in a gesture of submission, or expulsion. It was the elder, of course, whom Cherrick had faced. His palms were still red. There was a neat

bullet hole in his temple. Disease and hopelessness had not been entirely efficient, apparently.

Locke watched while the next of the bodies was thrown into the mass grave, and a third to follow that.

Bjornstrom, lingering on the far side of the pit, was lighting a cigarette. He caught Locke's eye.

"So it goes," he said.

From behind Locke, Tetelman spoke.

"We thought you wouldn't come back," he said, perhaps attempting to excuse his alliance with Bjornstrom.

"Stumpf is dead," said Locke.

"Well, even less to divide up," Tetelman said, approaching him and laying a hand on his shoulder. Locke didn't reply; he just stared down amongst the bodies, which were now being covered with lime, only slowly registering the warmth that was running down his body from the spot where Tetelman had touched him. Disgusted, the man had removed his hand, and was staring at the growing bloodstain on Locke's shirt.



"Never in a million years would I have thought we would be able to get the Mets' games here!"

Fred Pohl's contribution to this anniversary issue is a tale about the day all television went down and the surprising reason why. Recent novels by Mr. Pohl include NARABEDLA LTD and THOU FALSE LYSANDER (forthcoming), both from Del Rey.

The Star War

By Frederik Pohl

IT WAS SNEAKY. It was worse than Pearl Harbor. It was an absolutely unforgivable way to start a war, although, to the average American citizen, it looked like only fireworks at first.

Between his car and his front porch that night, a very average American citizen named Doug Sledecki stopped and stared at the sky. "Would you look at that, hon?" he remarked to his wife.

His wife, Irene, didn't answer. She wasn't speaking to her husband. The reason for that was that, in her opinion, Doug Sledecki had spent too much time in the kitchen with the redheaded, twice-married, unfortunately presently divorced and available hostess of the Homeowners' Association summer get-together they had just left. However, she did look.

It was worth looking at. The clear night sky was spectacularly splashed with flares of bright blue and white. There wasn't any sound of thunder. The lights weren't in sheets or streaks, like lightning. They were brilliant pinpoints, like Fourth of July rockets just before they burst into showers

of color, but the Fourth of July was well past. "They didn't say anything about thunderstorms on the six o'clock news," Sledecki grumbled, unlocking the door.

"That's not lightning," his wife said, breaking radio silence to set him straight. Sledecki flinched at her tone. He didn't respond, because he didn't want to hear that icy contralto again, but in the living room, when he automatically switched on the television set to get the late news, he couldn't help speaking.

"Damn cable's out again," he complained. There wasn't any late news. There wasn't even a picture. There was nothing but random white snow, untroubled by any image.

So when Sledecki went irritably up to his bed, he didn't get to sleep easily. Partly it was because of the frost from Irene's side of the bed. Mostly it was the disruption of long habits. It was the first time in years that he had tried going to sleep without the late news to drift him away — except on occasions of close personal involvement with Irene. The last episode of *that* sort was pretty remote in the past . . . though probably, if he read Irene's signals right, not as remote as the next one might be.

Doug Sledecki did not then know that his country had suffered an act of war.

His country found it out right away, though. At least the most important part of his country did, that part that lived inside a scooped-out mountain in Colorado, and there nobody went to sleep. In fact, it went the other way. The Deputy General in Command paused with his hand on the gold telephone. "It's pretty late in Washington, Hank," he observed to his superior. The superior threw a look at the situation boards all around the room, all of them flashing distress signals.

"I don't care *how* late it is," he roared. "Wake him up!"

In all of America's skies that night, there were auroras and fireworks. Sleepy householders blinked at them out of their picture windows. State cops leaned from their cruisers to stare. No one knew what they were seeing. What was worth seeing was too far away for them to see, because it was twenty-two thousand, four hundred miles straight up.

Of the major flashes, the nearest to Doug Sledecki was a two-ton chunk of metal directly over a point in the Pacific Ocean about twelve hundred miles west of Quito, Ecuador. It was a communications satellite,

and there were more than twenty more or less like it strung out along the equator, in line of sight to one part of the U.S.A. or another. In addition there were more than a hundred others in different orbits, but they all did more or less the same things, though with radically different purposes and results. Some relayed telephone messages and cables. Some swallowed news, sports, and the Johnny Carson show and sprayed them back to Earth. Some studied the Earth's surface in various kinds of optical and radio wavelengths, and sent back the information they gleaned; others listened for curiously coded strings of binary digits, and passed them on as orders to missile bases, nuclear submarines, and all the other machineries of war. Most of them were roughly the size of a washing machine, if you can imagine a washing machine with clusters of salad bowls and electric fans stuck to its sides. Some of the bowls and fans took in signals from transmitters on the ground below. Others bounced the same signals back to their destinations. They did this very well, and would have gone on doing it until their geostationary orbits decayed, if it had not been for the bright interlopers.

Now they were all dead.

At one moment the satellite over the Pacific was relaying prime-time shows to the television sets of Doug Sledecki and the other viewers below. At the next, there was a terrible ion flash. At the next still, there was nothing at all, because the satellite was blind.

The first human beings on the surface of the Earth to know about it were in NORAD, and they reacted at once. If *they* were blind, it was insupportable. . . .

Unless the other guys were blind, too.

So another fleet of satellite-killing satellites moved into position and blew themselves up, too, with showers of ionizing radiation that destroyed the comsats belonging to the rest of the world, and then everybody was blind at once.

And everybody paused to consider what to do next.

There was good news and bad news for Doug Sledecki the next morning. The good news was that Irene was talking to him again. "The TV still isn't working," she reported; the calamity had drawn them together. The bad news was that she was right. On a perfectly normal-seeming Wednesday morning, when the world had no right to be different from what a

perfectly average American would expect, there was no cable television at all and no network feed. No "Today" show. No "Good Morning, America." All the shows that needed satellite transmission were off the air, and local newscasters had been dragged out of bed to tell those few whose sets still drew signals from antennas on the roof that they were, after all, the lucky ones.

They didn't have much to tell, for the news-service printers, too, had long gone satellite. When they got tired of saying so, they went to Bugs Bunny reruns, and when they wearied of that, they took phone calls from viewers. Everyone saw that it was some kind of war. The first question on everyone's mind was, "Who's winning?" And then the second question overwhelmed it: "The hell with who's winning; who's the *enemy*?"

The day wore on without television. In Yazoo City, Mississippi, eight hundred pounds of crayfish went uneaten at the Baptist Ladies' Fair. Willard Scott had not been on the TV to tell the world about it, and nobody came. Preschool children whined at their mothers' knees for Bert and Ernie and Big Bird, but all they had were reruns of "Leave It to Beaver." In the junior high schools, the students, maddened by the prospect of withdrawal from "Star Trek" reruns, cut classes and failed spot quizzes. As one said to his teacher, "Man, what's the use, man?" (The teacher was a woman.)

That morning the American public stumbled to their jobs woefully unprepared for the world. Apart from the shock of discovering that a war, or some kind of a war, had happened while they slept, they were pitifully uninformed about the nature of reality. No one had been on the tube to tell them what the weather would be. No one could, because the weather satellites, too, were down. So almost none of the commuters had known how to dress. In heat waves in Chicago and Detroit, they wore slickers, boots, and umbrellas; and short-sleeved shirts and sandals in the unseasonable chill in Denver. Every cloud should have had some silver lining. The movie exhibitors, for instance, hoped for crowded theaters, but they didn't get them. Without Siskel and Ebert, the audiences didn't know which films they were supposed to see. Millions of American men tossed sleeplessly that night, unsated by film clips of the Mets, Nets, Jets, or Rams. It was a dangerous moment. A year's worth of new babies might have been started that night, except that millions of American women, deprived of "Days of Our Lives" and "All My Children," took an unaccus-

tomed look at the reality of their own lives. Including their husbands.

The telephones still worked locally, and so did those long lines that used microwave or ground cables. Of course, all the exchanges were jammed, as everybody called up everybody else to see if things were as bad there as they were at home. Still, enough long-distance lines were still open to deposit a blizzard of messages on the desk of every congressman in Washington, demanding that *Something Be Done*.

None of the congressmen needed those messages, because they had already got the message. They were as antsy as any voter as they gathered in extraordinary session in the Capitol, waiting for the president to tell them what was going on.

They had a long wait, because the president was in an extraordinary session of his own. The Cabinet Room was full — with the Cabinet itself, with the Joint Chiefs and staff members, with political advisers and specialists and the sweating, worried man from the space agency — as the president asked his counselors for their counsel.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs said with pride, "Mr. President, our options are all open. We've established contact with most of the Trident submarine force through surface-vessel relay, and of course all the B-52 bases and the ground-based arm are in shielded surface communication. I would consider a strike. Minutemen first, because they're the most vulnerable."

"Or because you want to get them launched before any more blow up in the silos?" asked the secretary of the interior. "Anyway, you left out an important part. Whom do we launch at? Russia? It might've been Russia. The only way it makes sense is if it was Russia. But we don't *know* it was Russia, do we?"

The four-star general from NORAD said unhappily, "Mr. President, the chronology is, ah, inconclusive. It was the Russki ASATS that zapped our birds, all right, but they didn't start it. Something zapped three of theirs, then their own system responded automatically."

"And what 'something' was that?" the president demanded.

"That's what we don't exactly know," said the general. "It almost looked like it was one of ours, only that's impossible."

"Of course it's impossible," snarled the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "So a limited strike *right now* —"

The president slammed his fist on the table. "Not one American has

died!" he cried. "Not one inch of American soil has been touched! There is no way I can justify a nuclear strike under these conditions!"

There was a silence. Then, timidly, the man from the space agency cleared his throat. "Mr. President, there is one thing we could try. We do have a routine launch of another communications satellite planned for tomorrow. We could send it up and see what happens?"

"What's the use of that?" demanded the president, but the secretary of defense leaned forward.

"Not to argue, Mr. President, but it might be a good idea, at that."

"But won't they just blast that one, too?"

"Likely so," the secretary agreed, "but maybe this time we'd be able to see who's doing it."

"And then," said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, his eyes gleaming, "pow."

But they didn't get to pow.

The new comsat rose tranquilly into orbit. It unfurled its antennas. It locked itself into operating mode. It began relaying signals; and no enemy ASAT offered it harm. Not that hour, not that week. Not ever.

Whatever was smashing satellites had given it up.

When Doug Sledecki rose that morning, he turned on the bedside TV out of habit, and — joy! — there was Connie Chung reporting that NBC was once again a real network. "Irene!" he cried, in tones of such excitement that Irene came dripping out of the shower to see.

She stood, staring and shivering. "Wouldn't you know," she said at last. "It's in black and white."

It was worse than that. It was faint and flickering, because that one little satellite beam had been stretched to cover the entire country; but it was there. "It'll get better," her husband promised.

It did, as the days passed and more and more comsats were rushed into orbit. Ted Turner got his Weather Channel going again, and his old-movie channels, and even once again Americans with a taste for tedium could watch the House of Representatives dawdling over its votes. Of course, they didn't just vote. They talked about what had happened, as did Connie Chung and Tom Brokaw and everybody else.

It was a pity that, really, they had very little to say, beyond the human-interest stories and the backgrounders and the brighteners. As to the

central questions of the crisis — *Who?* And *How?* — they simply did not know.

For that matter, neither did anyone else . . . or not at first. Not even in Moscow itself.

But there the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff, called the GRU, had at least a suspicion. The GRU communicated its suspicion to the Politbureau, and the Politbureau issued orders to the KGB. What the GRU knew was that there was a small installation with very large dish antennas on the outskirts of Moscow where certain things were done that could be relevant to the inquiry. But they didn't know why, and above all they didn't know who.

They had ways of finding out. Inquiries were made. Files were searched. At last the investigation centered around a minor researcher named Visarion Alexandreevitch Moshkin, who was known to have been working on the problem of how to hijack American satellites. That was not done by masked terrorists wielding Uzis, but by penetrating the command codes the Americans used, and overriding them, so that control passed from the American ground stations to the hijackers.

The GehBehs were sure Moshkin was their man, but he wasn't at his desk. He wasn't at his home, either. His former wife, who had divorced him years earlier, reported that she hadn't seen him, nor had any of his neighbors that day. But under the blotter in the living room that served Moshkin as a study (it also served him as living room, bedroom, and kitchen), the GehBehs found an unmailed letter. It was addressed to Mikhail Gorbachev. It was unsigned, but it said:

Dear Comrade Gorbachev:

Do not attempt to discover my identity. I have covered my tracks well. I act on behalf of the Socialist Fatherland, which your policies are destroying.

I refer, of course, to your so-called "perestroika," which flies in the face of the teachings of Lenin and would convert our holy Soviet Union into another decadent capitalist state, ruled by consumerism and profit.

It is clear that you propose to copy all the evils of capitalist America, even into their advertising industry, the chief culprit of fostering the insane materialism of their society. Television commercials incite

the maddened masses to impoverish themselves so that they may buy cars, washing machines, phonographs, television sets, and every manner of decadent consumer product, with the result that their manufacturing capacity receives a suicidal stimulus.

And now we see the same pattern beginning to emerge in our own Socialist state! I have seen it myself, in the marriage of a person known to me, whose wife was so besotted with the desire for electric mixing machines and even a video cassette recorder that she left her worthy husband to seek more fortune elsewhere. It must be stopped!

It is television that creates these diseased compulsions, and so, to stop this insane march to destruction, the fuse must be cut. Television must be destroyed! Not simply in our country, not even in America alone, but throughout the world — and fortunately for the human race, the means to do so is at my hand!

Moshkin had not covered his tracks as well as he thought, for it was simple enough to find the very few persons who had had access to the hijacking transmitters. Still, he was never caught. It was too late. By the time the KGB got to him, he had already passed beyond their power — that very afternoon, in fact, when he died in a riot at the GUM department store, in a line of two thousand Muscovites inflamed by the news that a shipment of pop-up toasters had just gone on sale.

Coming Soon

Next month: Three exceptional feature stories: KIRINYAGA by Mike Resnick, about a part of Africa that is transplanted to the stars and has its problems taking root. Also, Ben Bova, with DIAMOND SAM, a light-hearted tale about astronaut Sam Gunn; and George Alec Effinger's POSTERITY, a moving story about a visitor from the future and a writer who is forced to make some painful decisions.

The November issue is on sale September 29.

Charles L. Grant ("Crystal," August 1986) is a master of the atmospheric tale of terror, none better than this story about an urban Yankee's visit to the damp and eerie home of his southern fiancée.

City Boy

By Charles L. Grant

FIVE DAYS OF slow rain: steady and cool and dulling the light, taking color from the leaves and weighting them on their branches, dripping from the eaves for a shower of their own, without the voice of a storm because there was no wind to push it, or twist it, or slap it against the pane and turn it to droplets that weep toward the sill.

Five days of slow rain; the temperature belonging to a dark day in autumn, when the dead leaves of spring spot the lawns and clog the gutters and turn brittle before dawn when the dew turns to frost.

Five days, and John was almost used to the storm, if such a word could be given to such a quiet battering of the senses, and he spent a fair amount of time just standing at the window. And when a gust spattered the glass, he shifted, and listened, and heard nothing at all; it was as if he'd gone deaf. It didn't bother him. It would pass. At the moment he had other things to give him worry, other things to feed his concern.

Lorry, he thought; what the hell am I going to do about Lorry?

A surge of laughter from downstairs, muffled by the big house, not including him at all.

The large room he'd been given after his arrival was papered in dark silver and white, and filled with large furniture — a sofa with a high scrolled back and thick cushions, a pair of club chairs in brown leather and studded around with gold, a glass-fronted bookcase with matched volumes whose gilt-lettered titles were long faded to no more than shallow impressions, standing lamps of brass with dark green shades, and an ottoman in the center of the brown-carpeted floor.

A bed at the far wall, raised on a wide platform and quilted in down.

A comfortable room, in a comfortable house that pretended to be Tudor on a hillside in Tennessee.

There was only one window, high and arched and overlooking a wide lawn that slipped down a mild slope to a creek mostly hidden by willows and oaks. Beyond the creek was a field; and beyond the field, a forest that darkened the hills rolling dark to the horizon.

The view was difficult to focus on because of the rain that had spawned its own blurring fog in curls and smoke strips across the slopes. Yet he had watched without seeing for nearly fifteen minutes, one hand in his trouser pocket, the other holding a cigarette he never drew on. And when a length of ash finally fell to the floor, he started, looked down, and frowned.

If Lorraine spotted it, she would be angry. Neatness, especially from such a habit as smoking, was something she demanded of virtually the entire world. He hadn't known that when he'd met her; he knew it now, more than most.

For a moment his eyes closed. For a moment he was tempted to lean down and brush the gray ash out of sight, under the edge of the carpet. Instead he opened the window and flicked the cigarette out, shivering as the chilled damp air breached the room and his thin white shirt. He took a deep breath. He listened to a jay scolding in the willows. And saw someone stumbling across the field, up the slope by the woods.

"Idiot," he said quietly, squinting as if that would help part the rain so he could see the man better. He was gray, the poor man, clearly without a coat, though distance smeared his features. John watched as he went down on one knee and stayed there for almost a full minute before rising, staggering backward, lurching forward, and angling down the slope. The trees along the creek hid him then, and John soon shrugged and dismissed him.

A drunk. The village idiot. It didn't matter, the man was gone.

With an exhalation more a sigh, he pushed the sash down and backed away, circling the room without purpose until he reached the bookcase and stared blindly at the books, at the occasional gap where silver-framed photographs of Lorry's family rested.

That's me soon, he thought, focusing on an old picture Lorry had taken of her two cousins and their spouses; soon someone else will hold the camera, and there'll be six there instead of four.

For some reason the idea chilled him, and he hurried to sit in one of the armchairs, his legs crossed at the ankles, his hands folded loosely in his lap.

He waited again.

And in waiting, couldn't help looking at the ash on the floor, thinking about the scene she would make (though quiet, always maddeningly quiet), and the response he must give her. Cool. He would have to be cool, distant, unapologetic without being insulting. Anything else would mean he had lost; anything else would mean he would have to get married.

"Jesus," he muttered. He fumbled in his breast pocket for another cigarette, looked at it, put it back, and put his hands on his knees. Oh God, what a jackass!

At night, late at night when the house was quiet and the hills turned to black, he dreamed before sleeping of how easy it would be: slowly, word by word and inattention by inattention, he would prove that he didn't love her, that it would be a mistake to carry on, to believe they could be happy; start an argument, flirt with other women, fortify himself, and be impervious to her seductions. Sooner or later she would harden. Sooner or later she would wonder aloud in an angry moment if they ought not to reconsider the plans they had made.

It was the only thing to do; he was too frightened to try it any other way. He didn't want her to hate him; he just didn't want her to love him.

The door behind him opened.

He twisted around and saw Lorraine on the threshold, cut flowers in one hand, stone vase in the other. His smile was brief, without affection; he sat back and stared at the window.

"John, are you all right?"

"It's the rain," he said sullenly as she placed the vase on his nightstand, the flowers in the vase, and, after a moment's consideration, sat on the

ottoman in front of him. "I never saw so much damned rain in my life." A gesture toward the hills. "I honest to God don't think I can stand it one more day."

She grinned and shook her head, sending long brown hair swinging over her shoulders. She was attractive, and there was no getting around it, though a perfectionist might make something of the length of her thin nose, and the lack of flesh about her chin; she was lively, always exercising, walking, and always in a print shirt and jeans, hair tied back in a ponytail that slapped at her spine. Country girl. Pink cheeks and bright eyes and a mouth that sent invitations each time she winked.

They had met in Boston, both there on business, both alone and lonely. And again in New York, this time not by chance.

Four months later, after several delirious and almost frightening weekends together, she'd called and asked him down; he'd thought about it, and had accepted.

He thought he loved her; he knew he was terrified of having her around forever.

"You do get used to it, you know," she said earnestly, clasping her hands snugly in her lap. "Like you get used to the snow."

He groaned. "Snow? You mean white stuff? Shovels and plows and sleighs, Santa Claus and all that crap?"

"And all that crap," she answered, reaching out to slap his thigh playfully.

"But this is the South," he complained. "It's not supposed to do that stuff down here."

She looked at him sideways and laughed. "My God, this weather really has gotten to you, hasn't it?"

He puffed his cheeks and blew slowly. "I guess." He watched her. "I guess." Easy, he told himself; don't overdo it. He nodded to the window. "I saw some drunk out there before."

"Really? Who?"

"Well, how should I know? He was just bumbling along on that hill over there. Jerk didn't even have a coat."

She looked over her shoulder, looked back. "Still."

"Huh?"

She grinned and poked his chest. "Now, c'mon, John, you can't tell me you don't know what a still is."

He stared at her blankly for several seconds before saying, "Ah," and nodding.

"Those woods are full of them," she explained. "Every so often you get a hell of a fire because one of them blows up, or one of the tenders — the guys who keep watch — he decides to take a sample and ends up halfway across the state." She shuddered. "I think I'd rather drink poison."

She grabbed his hand before he could pull away, and yanked him to his feet. "C'mon, you've been in here all day. Let's go see the others."

He sighed dramatically. "Others?"

"Cathy's here," she said, ignoring the protest. "And Del Warford."

"Great," he muttered, and winced when she slapped his knee, not lightly. "Well, I can't help it. He's —"

"A cousin," she reminded him.

"Right." They were all cousins here, he thought glumly; the whole damned county seemed to be related in some way.

"John."

"All right, all right." And he followed, holding back just enough to make her look at him once before they reached the stairs. Below, in the front room, he could hear laughter at a story her brother, Peter, was telling about his recent trip to England. His father's voice was loudest, Del's close behind as Peter finished the tale. When John stepped in, they turned and smiled and didn't rise; he was one of the family now, no formalities required. In the far corner of the large room, Cathy Glower watched him with amusement in her eyes, one hand buried in long and thick black hair, idly scratching her scalp.

She winked at him.

He looked away.

"We're going for a walk," Lorraine announced.

"Lorry, dear, in the rain?" Cathy said, feigning shock.

"Why not? It's good for you."

"But my dear, poor Mr. Aker will simply —"

"Enough," Lorry snapped, and they were gone before anyone could answer, and he didn't dare protest until they had reached the kitchen door.

"Are you nuts?" he said then, pulling his hand free. "That's pneumonia weather out there."

Lorraine wrinkled her nose at him, pulled a pair of yellow slickers from their pegs on the wall, and tossed one to him. "Don't be an ass. You

get rain up North. C'mon, put it on."

She opened the door and stepped out onto a narrow porch protected by a slanted slate roof, the sides slatted by a white trellis thick with vines that stirred and husked when the rain slapped at the broad leaves. She looked back. "Well? It's only water, darling. The stuff of life."

He shrugged and joined her. The cold spring air tightened his cheeks, dried his lips despite the rain. He watched as she stared at the hills, and he thought that if he could ever love someone, surely she would be the one.

But he couldn't.

He didn't dare.

Love, even without its romance, was too much like a cage, and too much like a vampire, and too much like dying.

"John, for heaven's sake!"

He blinked and wiped his face dry of a spattering off the roof. "Huh?" He blinked again and saw her smiling sadly.

"You don't want to get married, do you?"

"Of course I do," he said indignantly.

Her sigh was barely audible, and she took his hand again, led him off the porch and along the back of the house. The rain soaked him quickly, but he kept his teeth clenched to prevent them from chattering. This was dumb. This was the way they did it in the movies, only they didn't tell you how cold it was and how miserable it was and how you had to wriggle like an impatient kid when the rain started to run down your pants.

They reached a spot below his room, and she looked up, shading her eyes and squinting.

"Lorry —"

"Hush," she snapped, yanking his hand, once and hard.

He hushed. He tried to see what she was seeing. He tried to ignore the way the slicker grew weighted and cold and dragged on his shoulders.

"I do want to marry you," she said, her voice mixed with the rain. "The trouble is, it's obvious you don't want to marry me."

He opened his mouth, shut it, shook his head.

"I know what you're doing," she whispered, looking at him sideways, releasing his hand with a snap of her arm. "It won't work. I'm just as frightened as you are, only I'm going to work at getting rid of it. I'm sorry, John. I won't let you go. I won't let you hurt me. I love you too much."

She started to hum, so quietly he almost didn't hear her, and he sneezed,

and she kissed his cheek and went inside, just as the clouds began to break and show blue.

Damn, he thought as he followed her down the hall, hearing his future father-in-law laugh explosively while Del desperately tried to explain that it wasn't a joke at all. Cathy's raincoat was gone from the hall rack.

He glanced in, then swung himself around the newel post and up the stairs, back to his room, damning himself, damning his plan, and tossing the still-dripping slicker onto the floor.

He kicked off his shoes and dropped onto the bed, pillowing his hands behind his head and glancing at the flowers. They were yellow, red, one of them nearly orange. Not quite roses, but he didn't know their name.

He closed his eyes.

You're an idiot, you know, he thought as he fell into a feverlike doze; what the hell are you afraid of?

Dreaming then, and not dreaming, of Lorry humming in the yard and Del giggling and Cathy dancing.

He opened his eyes.

The room was dark.

And the humming continued until he slipped off the bed and walked over to the window.

The yard was empty, the air cool when he raised the sash, and in the trees on the distant hill, he could see a flickering light. The Glower place. Cathy living alone because her husband had run off.

Now that, he thought sourly as he stripped off the rest of his clothes and returned to bed, is a hell of a great recommendation to join the Floring clan — Cathy's husband had taken up with an art professor in Memphis; Del's wife, just last winter, had left a note on his pillow, telling him she'd decided to move to Los Angeles with her lover.

Peter's wife, Sarra, was dead — five years with cancer before she finally quit the fight.

He climbed under the coverlet and stared at the dark.

Christ, he thought; Christ.

The following day the weather cleared, and Peter took him around the grounds, to show him the estate that would be partly his when the knot had been tied. He didn't much care for the choice of words, but nevertheless made all the proper noises as Peter and his father, a full-bearded and

portly man, enthused about the creek, about the pastures, about a stable where he saw half a dozen horses anxious to get out.

He knew how they felt.

"I didn't know Lorry rode," he said as Peter opened the stalls and led the horses to their paddock.

"She doesn't," said Arthur Floring. He mopped his face with a red handkerchief. "I do; Peter does. My daughter has other interests."

John nodded as if he knew what the man was talking about, and had to admit that the animals now racing across the grass were beautiful indeed. They were obviously well cared for, and he smiled at the way they kicked up their heels, snorted, tossed their manes, nipped each other's flanks, and raced away again. One came to the white slat fence, poked his head over, and John stepped away when he saw all those teeth.

Peter laughed. "He won't bite you, you know."

"Right," John said nervously. "Now tell him that."

The younger man looked astonished. "Really, John, you're not that much of a city boy, are you?"

"Of course he is," said Floring jovially as he joined them and pulled a silver flask from his hip. "If he weren't, do you think Lorry would have picked him?"

John stiffened.

Peter touched his shoulder then, and told his father he was going to take him out to the bridge. John didn't argue. He was a city boy, no question about it, and part of his reluctance to marry Lorry was her insistence that they live here, in what, in contrast to his home, could only be called wilderness.

"Don't let him bother you," Peter said softly as they walked on through the grass. "He likes you just fine, but he can't help wishing Lorry had chosen Del."

"Del? But he's a cousin."

"Too far removed to count. Besides, he's rich, lots of land, and the most boring sonofabitch you ever met in your life. As," he added dryly, "I'm sure you've already noticed."

"She's marrying down instead of up, is that it?" he said.

Peter stopped and looked at him. "No, John. She's marrying you."

The day warmed, grew hot, despite the clouds that still rode the peaks. And slowly, he began to see the attraction of this place, this whole part

of the country — the way the air sat still though a breeze pushed his hair, the way the birds soared and dove, the way he walked now, with no sense of haste and no desire to find any.

The bridge, when they reached it, was arched and made of fieldstone, with a rough wood railing raised across the top. Below was a shallow creek nearly six feet wide, heavy brush on the banks, glittering stone on the bottom. Reeds on heavy stalks. A spot of color here and there, and John recognized the flowers Lorry had brought to his room. At the apex they stopped and looked down at the water that only rippled when the breeze blew.

God, he thought, you could get lost down here and not care.

He glanced over at Peter, whose hands were in his pockets, chin lowered toward his chest.

"John," the younger man said thoughtfully, "you're a good man, Yankee notwithstanding, but you'd better know now that I'm Lorry's best friend. I always have been, and I always shall be. That's rather a rare thing now between brother and sister, but I wanted you to know it."

He did. And he wasn't so naive that he didn't recognize the warning — *hurt her, my friend, and you'll have to deal with me.*

A call, then, that momentarily darkened the man's face, and when John looked up, he saw Cathy riding toward them across a field on a horse large and brown. She waved. He waved back. And edged away when the horse reached the bridge and suddenly shied and snorted.

Cathy sawed the reins and cursed.

Peter laughed without mirth and said, "I have things to do, John. You can find your way back?"

He nodded, still watching the animal fearfully, hoping the woman would be able to control it; he had no desire to play cowboy in case the thing bolted.

It didn't.

It soon calmed, and he felt incredibly foolish when Cathy slipped from the saddle and gave the beast a kiss and pat.

"He's impossible sometimes," she said as she joined him, turning to lean against the railing and fan herself with one hand. "He thinks he's the boss." Her laugh was a trill, a songbird by the stream. "Now isn't that just like a man?"

Her hair was loose and wind-tangled, her cheeks flushed from the ride.

Once in the saddle, she waved and was gone, and John knew he'd been warned a second time.

And the way her breasts pushed against her khaki shirt made him turn his attention back to the water.

"So," she said, "you're really going to do it?"

"If you mean get married . . . yes, I suppose I am."

She turned to lean on the railing with him. "Well, at least Lorry won't be like Del's wife."

He said nothing.

The water moved and seemed not to.

Cathy hummed under her breath, nodding, brushed a fly away, glancing at him once in a while until, at last, she moved closer.

He could smell her, almost touch her; he heard the humming, and almost recognized the tune.

"I love my husband, John," she whispered. "Just like Lorry loves you."

She covered his hand with hers, forcing him to meet her gaze. "She's my dearest friend," she said, lips in a smile, eyes giving them the lie. "Nearly a sister. A tyrant, maybe, but be a dear and be nice."

Then she kissed his cheek, pinched it with a laugh, and ran to her grazing horse. Once in the saddle, she waved and was gone, and John knew he'd been warned a second time.

And he didn't like it at all.

By the time he reached the house, his annoyance had turned to anger, and his desire for confrontation was frustrated when he was told that Lorry had gone into town to do some shopping, something special for the dinner they were having that night at Cathy Glower's. In his honor. As the new member of the family.

"I think it's dress and all that," Peter said.

"I don't give a shit," he answered.

Peter raised an eyebrow. "You could probably fit into one of my tuxes, if you want."

John stood at the foot of the stairs. "I just told you that I don't give a damn. I'll wear what I have."

"Lorry won't like it."

"So she can sue me." And he stomped to his room, looked for something to punch, and when he caught his reflection in the mirror, he couldn't believe what a fool he was making of himself. What the hell was wrong with him? What the hell. . . . He scowled, slammed open the closet door, and yanked out his only suit.

If they didn't like it, they could fire him.

It would solve a hell of a lot of problems.

So this is what time warps are like, he thought four hours later; and in spite of himself, he was impressed.

The Glower house was more accurately a mansion, gabled and columned, with a broad encircling veranda, its rooms huge, well appointed, and seemingly untouched since the days before what Cathy laughingly called The Union Plague. She herself had dressed in a white hoopskirt gown, complete with emerald satin ribbons that matched those in her hair. Lorry, too, had gone the route, and he in his dark jacket, sans tie, felt out of place without feeling uncomfortable.

"Y'all like it?" Cathy asked, taking his arm when a thin man in livery announced dinner. "Surely you must like it. Ah'd be crushed if you didn't."

He grinned at her exaggerated accent, laughed aloud when Lorry mimicked her, and couldn't believe how relaxed he felt once he sat down and had some wine.

He also felt incredibly stupid. And every time he looked at Lorry, he told himself that all his self-pity, all his plans to force her out of his life, were nothing more than premarital jitters. He was, after all, giving up nearly a full lifetime of bachelorhood, of setting his own rules, living his own life, answerable to no one and wanting no one to help him. It was only natural he should be anxious when faced with the threat of losing all that.

He drank.

They laughed.

He was given two glasses of water and dared to mark the difference between the well and bottled. He grinned and tasted and made his choice.

"Wrong!" Cathy shouted in delight.

He laughed.

They drank.

He held up his glass and broke into a verse of "Old Man River," his voice deep and clear, though not always in key.

"John," Lorry said in soft admonition. And, "John, please," again when he refused to stop.

"But darlin'," he answered when the second verse was done, "this is the Southland, right? Isn't that a Southland song?" He shook his head, feeling drunk. "You ain't got no soul, dear."

And they all laughed, far longer than he, and for a moment he wondered if he'd made an ass of himself.

But the moment passed, the laughter sighed to conversation, and, fascinated, he watched as the servants — maid and butler — glided in and out of the vast dining room; silently, he listened to Del tell stories of his dealings in cattle and land, and twice reach around behind him to poke the passing chubby maid, who, it was clear, had more than service on her mind when she slapped his hand away and giggled.

No one said a word.

Not even when the young butler poured Cathy her after-dinner brandy, and she pinched his rump as he left.

He didn't flinch.

John saw him smile.

Then Arthur rose and proposed a toast, they drank, and drank again, and in the wash of smiles they gave him, he realized how wrong he'd been, how cowardly, how dumb. It was clear from the odd and not unpleasant feeling that rose in his chest that giving Lorry pain would be worse than anything else he could imagine. So . . . he would adjust. He would give it his best shot.

And if he didn't tell Lorry soon, he was going to bust.

Del started another story.

John leaned over to Lorry and said, "Darlin', I need to talk to you." And he nodded toward the front room.

"Later," she said bluntly, applauding Del's anecdote.

"Please," he said.

She glared.

"Lorry, for heaven's sake."

She turned to him. She glared again. "Do not interrupt me, John. I will talk to you later."

He frowned, puzzled, and pushed back his chair before his temper

became heated. "I'll be waiting," he whispered, and excused himself with a smile the others returned when he told them the meal needed some walking or he was going to fall asleep.

In the front room he stretched; in the center hall he studied the staircase; on the front porch he paced the width of the house, taking deep breaths, not blaming her for her reaction because she obviously still thought he was still trying to escape.

He snorted. A hell of a word: *escape*.

And when the night's chill grew too much, he reopened the front door, and saw the butler on the staircase, carrying a silver tray toward the top. When he reached the landing, he turned, saw John, and smiled.

John stepped over the threshold.

Lorry called him.

He didn't move.

It's him, he thought; damn, it's the drunk on the hill.

The butler didn't move.

"Excuse me," he said, and said no more when Cathy swept into the hall and her smile snapped off.

"Warner," she said sharply.

The butler's own smile wavered, and for a moment John was sure the man was going to cry. Then he moved on, stumbling now, nearly upsetting the tray as he vanished around the corner into the upstairs hall.

"Lord, help is so unreliable," Cathy complained. "I'd better make sure he hasn't. . . ." She gathered up her skirts and took the stairs quickly.

John heard his name again, and heard Peter tell his sister not to worry; he can't get lost.

Right, he thought, and would have gone straight to her if he hadn't heard the humming.

He cocked his head, he strained, and finally he remembered — it was the same tune he'd heard Lorry humming the last day of the rain, the one Cathy had hummed when they'd met on the bridge. Curious to hear it now, though he wasn't sure exactly why, and with a glance to the front room to make sure it was still empty, he followed Cathy up the stairs, left hand sliding along the banister, pausing when he reached the landing, then moving on more quickly.

The corridor was empty.

A door was open several yards down.

With a glance over his shoulder, he moved to the wall and walked on, stopping just shy of the door — when the humming stopped, he heard a slap and another, and a man cried out softly.

And a hand gripped his arm just as Cathy laughed.

"Let's go, John," said Peter. "It's time to leave."

A night of dreams and song — one, the other, and waking several times as if dragged by a fever.

He swallowed, wished for water, and fell asleep again.

Lorry stood in the doorway, cut flowers in her hand. "Aren't you ever going to get up?"

He raised himself on his elbows and watched her cross the room. "The house is quiet."

"They've gone riding."

"We're alone?" he said as she exchanged old flowers for new. He reached for her; she moved away. "Hey, I remember a time when you'd jump me at a time like this."

She looked at him sideways. "Jump you?"

He winked broadly.

She grinned. "There'll be time enough for that, stud." She grabbed the bedclothes and yanked them back. "Now get off your ass, boy. We've work to do."

"Work?"

Her laugh was high and quick as she slapped his legs to get him moving. "You think this place runs itself? Lord, you *are* an innocent, aren't you?"

He shrugged, dressed hastily as she watched from a point near the door, and, after a large breakfast, followed her outside to do more physical work in one day than he'd done in his life — cleaning the stables, currying the horses, cleaning the stables, repairing a section of fence one of the animals had split with a kick.

By lunchtime he was exhausted.

"Jesus, this is slave labor," he muttered, turning his hands over and wincing at the blisters. "Why the hell don't you hire someone to help out?"

Lorry shook her head. "Don't need it."

"The hell you don't."

They worked all afternoon, until he realized that she wasn't working at all; at least, she wasn't doing half the things he was. "I thought you were liberated," he said, stripped to the waist, a sawn log in his arms.

"I am," she told him. "But I'm not stupid."

He dropped the log. "Well, lady, I quit." He dusted his hands on his jeans. "My muscles are sore, my sores have sores, and I smell like that goddamned stable."

"John," she snapped. "We're not done."

"You're not. I am."

He limped toward the house.

"John!"

He turned then, hands on his hips. "Hey," he said angrily, "you talked to me like that last night, remember? I didn't much like it then, and I sure as hell don't like it now." He gave her a brief smile. "You're getting a husband, Lorraine, not a hired hand."

He waited, and when she did nothing but glare at him, he shrugged and returned to the house. In the kitchen he ran cold water and doused himself with it, not caring about the spills, only sighing at the relief. Then, hair and chest dripping, he went to the door to look for Lorry.

She was gone.

He rolled his eyes. Maybe, he thought, I ought to rethink my rethinking, and surprised himself by feeling no guilt. And didn't question it when he went upstairs, where he showered, changed his clothes, and pulled one of the day's fresh flowers from the vase. Holding it under his nose, taking the scent and trying to place it, he walked off his temper around the room, until, on the third pass, he stopped at the bookcase.

He grunted.

"I'll be damned," he said.

The Glower butler was in one of the pictures — he stood behind Cathy, wearing a white suit and dark tie, hair thick, skin tanned.

He frowned.

And the chubby maid, in a frilly sundress long out of style, stood behind Del — one hand on his shoulder, dark lips pursed in a kiss at his ear.

"What the hell. . . ?" he whispered, and bent his knees to get a closer look, tilted his head to get a different angle — nearly fell over when the door slammed open and Lorry stormed in. And stopped when she saw

him looking from the photograph to her.

He pointed the flower at the picture, then at her. "Is this some kind of game or what?" he demanded, taking a step toward her. "Some kind of Southern family-type game you play just for kicks with the poor little city boy who doesn't know his ass from his elbow?" Another step. "Just what the hell —"

Lorry sang a single note.

The flower exploded.

And John saw himself falling, slowly, silently, down a black-brick well with nothing at the bottom but a bouquet of red.

A voice: "One more day."

An answer: "I don't know. He's too much like Sarra."

A thought: *Sarra's dead.*

A voice: "God, I wish Warner were like him."

An answer: "You can't have him."

A thought: *Sarra's dead!*

HE WOKE without transition — eyes snapped open, mouth already open, hands clutching the sheets tightly as he battled the stifling air for one clean breath that was too long coming.

And when it did come, rasping and cold, he smelled the flowers and rolled his head to the left and saw them in the vase, all the colors, vivid despite the twilight that turned his room shades of gray.

He tried to sit up and had to swallow bile; he twisted onto his side and waited for the room to stop lurching; he sucked his lower lip between his teeth and slowly lifted himself up on one elbow, hissing as he anticipated pain, wondering what the hell had hit him that made him feel so drained.

He fell off the bed.

The edge had been there and he hadn't seen it, and he cried out as he struck the platform's rim and crumpled to the floor.

Drugs, he thought; goddamned drugs.

The floor was cool against his cheek, his side, his thigh, and he tapped the length of him before realizing he was naked. It didn't matter. He didn't care. He pushed himself up until he was leaning back against the platform, took a number of deep breaths and flexed his legs, cursed their

weakness, rolled to hands and knees, and froze when he heard the singing.

Downstairs. In the front room. Several voices, Lorry's loudest among them.

"Oh Christ," he said.

He reached up and grabbed the edge of the nightstand and hauled himself up. Tired; he was so damned tired. His eyes drew level with the flowers, and they were bright, as if illuminated by a bulb within their stems.

"Oh Christ."

A few minutes, perhaps five, and he was on his feet and the vase was pressed to his chest and he was stumbling across the room toward the window.

He didn't know why.

The flowers glowed.

He tried not to inhale the scent too deeply, and ended up panting by the time he reached the sill, where his knees gave way and he fell, twisting and hitting his shoulder, landing on his buttocks, facing the door. Perspiration drenched him and chilled him; he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.

The butler; the maid.

It wasn't drugs — it was the singing, and the flowers. Somehow Lorry and her kin had managed to find a way to suppress the will, to create . . . he laughed silently, close to weeping, when *slave labor* came to mind.

And now it was his turn. Exhaust him with boredom, with work, with sexual tension unreleased. Weaken him. Soften him. Trust his city instincts to deny it all until it all was too late.

"You're crazy," he told himself as he looked down at the flowers. "You're out of your —"

And the door suddenly opened and let in the light, let the shadow on the threshold see him.

"Oh John," said Lorry sadly.

The singing had stopped.

"I don't understand," he said, one hand waving feebly.

She stepped into the room, but he couldn't see her face.

"Lorry," he pleaded, and said nothing more when he heard the whining in his voice. Anger stirred, but he was too weak to do anything about it but pray it wouldn't leave him. It was all he had left that he could rightfully call his own.

She dropped heavily into his chair and leaned forward, hands clasped on his knees. "I'm going to marry you," she said at last.

"No, you're not."

He could sense the smile, and sensed the pity.

"Let me put it this way," she said. "Tonight you're going to be mine. It's the same thing, really."

He set the vase down, kept one hand around it as if it needed protecting. His other hand lay on his thigh, which he pinched as hard as he could several times, which gave him no pain until he stoked the anger. "Like ... Cathy and her husband?"

"In a way."

"And Del's wife?"

Lorry nodded, shadow moving, chair creaking as she shifted right shadow hand to shadow hair. "You'll love it," she said, and giggled.

He ignored it. "Peter's wife died because whatever you did, she fought it, right? Sarra didn't die of cancer at all. You probably buried her in a field."

The giggle became a bitter laugh. "She was a bitch. She wanted equal rights. With me." Shadow standing. Moving toward him. Leaning over him. Kissing his brow. "I love you, John. I want you with me." Fingers trailing through his hair, and instead of cowering, he growled and shook her away. "Wrong, darling, mustn't do that."

She slapped him.

She strode to the door, called down, and the singing began again.

John reached across his lap and yanked the flowers from the vase. He held them close to his eyes, blinking, tearing, then began to strip blossoms petal by petal and crush them beneath his heels. When Lorry finally turned around, he was on the last flower, grinning at her.

"You'll need more," he said, and threw the last stem across the room.

And held his breath as she returned, and knelt in front of him, and shook her head.

"Cut flowers, John," she said, "are useless, didn't you know that? Surely they teach you that in the city. They're not really alive. And they're not really dead." Her finger touched the hollow of his throat. "Like Warner is." The finger tracked down his chest. "Like you will be." To his stomach. "And whenever I want, you'll clean the stables with your bare hands." To his groin. "You'll paint the house with a toothbrush." To his inner thigh. "You'll fuck my brains out." And back again.

She cocked her head, and mimicked him: "You ain't got no soul, Lorraine."

And laughed.

And made to stand.

And screamed when one heel caught her knee and the other struck her chin and he crawled over her and grabbed her jaw and opened her mouth and poured the contents of the vase down her throat while her family sang downstairs and his hands held her mouth shut and she swallowed and he wept and didn't move when the light jumped on and Cathy stood in the doorway.

He watched her.

She watched Lorraine.

He said, "I may come from the city, but I know what keeps plants alive in a goddamned vase."

For a moment the woman paled.

John stood, swayed, leaned against the windowsill, watching as Lorry scrabbled at her throat and kicked at the air and slowly, very slowly, let her hands fall.

"Jesus," Cathy said.

He waited for her to attack him, or call the others; he waited for Lorry to come around and prove it was all a dream; then he pushed away from the sill and said, "Where does the soul go?", and Cathy pointed at the bookcase.

Unsteadily, he walked over to the picture and saw himself standing in the foreground, Lorraine at his side, wide-brimmed hat, hooped skirt, a sunny smile like a summer scream.

His eyes narrowed, and closed; he leaned his head against the glass.

The singing stopped.

My God, he thought.

There were footsteps on the stairs.

Oh God, what have I done?

And when his eyes opened, he saw Lorraine's reflection, rising from the floor.

City boy, he thought bitterly.

And, "Cathy," he said, "you'll have to teach me how to sing."

Avram Davidson is a former editor of this magazine, and like all editors, he appreciates that a story can sometimes be told as well in three pages as in 30, or 300. We are fortunate that he is also a writer with the talent to provide a perfect example. . .

While You're Up

By Avram Davidson

THE SCENE MIGHT have been painted by Maxfield Parrish, perhaps the best of painters during that rich, lost era that also gave the world Leonardo and Rembrandt. While the latter two have their spokesmen, nay, their devotees, even they would have to concede that neither ever painted so blue a sky, and that there are those who deny that such blue skies ever indeed existed is (as Sexton often explained) beside the point. "They ought to have existed," Tony said now to the few friends, to Mother Ruth — his wife of many years — all sitting in the large front room to which his preeminence and seniority entitled him. "They ought to have existed, for, as we see now, sometimes they almost do — and — look! a cloud!"

Mother Ruth, who had certainly seen clouds from this room before, merely smiled and murmured something soft and inaudible; the others craned and clearly spoke of their delight and good fortune. All, except of course, for Samjo, who continued sitting with his mouth open. Tony Sexton more than once had said, though — they could all well remember —

"Don't ever underestimate Samjo. He sees more than you think, and he adds things up, too."

"The wine should be warm enough to drink in a few minutes," Sexton said now. "We brought it up from the cellar several hours ago."

Barnes, from his chair with the wooden arms, declared, hands sweeping the air, "Good friends, a good view, good thoughts, and — good wine, too." Overfamiliarity may have perhaps tarnished the quotation, but Barnes's enthusiasm was always contagious.

Maria said, "This moment, with the view and the blue and the cloud and, shortly, the wine — will be a moment that I shall always remember." She peered forward, probably seeking to look into Mother Ruth's eyes, for such was Maria's habit; when she said something worthy, she felt, of notice, she sought someone's eyes and, as it were, sought to bring forth an evident approval: a smile, a nod, an expression of the face, a gesture. But this time it was not forthcoming. Perhaps Maria, for all she knew, was just a bit annoyed.

Perhaps Tony understood all this, for he smiled his famous Sexton smile, and said, "Mother Ruth often looks into her apron as the ancient sibyls did into their crystal bowls." For it was true, Mother Ruth dared to wear the antique apron, so long outlawed; and almost it did seem to make her look like something from antique eras.

Barnes picked up the metaphor and asked — Barnes often asked very odd questions — "Father, were those crystal bowls empty when the sibyls looked into them, or did they contain something, a . . . a liquid, perhaps?"

Tony Sexton very slightly pursed his lips. "Wine, I suppose, would have been too precious for such a use; water would always be in short supply. What, then? A thick soup would surely have interfered with the visioning, so — broth perhaps?"

Barnes in a moment went bright: A new concept! Then the brightness went. "One never knows when you are making a joke," he muttered.

"I wanted to have a few friends over," Sexton said, lightly leaving the subject. "Wine and five glasses waiting, a day with a lot of blue, and, if we were lucky . . . and I felt we would be lucky . . . even a cloud. A day to be remembered."

Murmurs from all assured him that the day would surely be remembered. With an effect most odd, Sexton's face turned gray, and his body seemed to fall in upon itself. For a second only, his face — like a dim, thin,

crusted mask — rested on what seemed a pile of ashes; then it, too, dissolved.

The reaction of the others was varied. Maria started to rise, fell back, composed herself, looked about with a rueful air. Mother Ruth sagged. "Oh, Tony, Tony," she said, her voice very small. Barnes exclaimed loudly, beat his hands upon the costly arms of his chair. "He didn't *renew*!" cried Barnes. "Time and time again, I asked, I begged — much good that will do now," he said, deeply annoyed. He bent over, removed from the still settling pile the small tag of malleable substance, read aloud, "Your warranty expires on or about the hour of noon on the 23rd of April, 2323." Several voices declared that Tony Sexton had timed it just about right — leave it to Sexton! they said.

Maria now rose all the way. "I think," she said, "that now is just the time to drink that container of wine Sexton was saving; he'd want that, wouldn't he?"

"Bound to!" exclaimed Barnes. "Absolutely!"

Mother Ruth looked up from her lap. "Maria, dear. While you're up. *Would* you mind also bringing back with you the dustpan *and* the broom? Thank you, dear."

Samjo had as usual seemed to have been thinking of nothing at all; as often, this semblance was deceptive. He had been wiping, first his eyes, then his nose, with an article of cloth quite as archaic as Mother Ruth's apron. Then he spoke. "Only four glasses now, Maria," said he.

Who could help chuckling?



This story about three contestants in "The Times of Your Lives" is not the first SF extrapolation of a big time gameshow, but we're betting it will be one of the most mordant and hard-hitting stories of its type you'll ever read.

Rat Run

By Wayne Wightman

BUT I JUST died!" the mousy woman cried out to the game-show host. She pressed her hands to her cheeks and looked around her at the cushioned chairs, the potted palms, and the dense begonias hanging in silver baskets. Then, with hot breath, she whispered, "Am I in Heaven?"

"No, my dear," said Mr. Michael, the host, as he put one arm around her back and held one of her hands in his. "This is not Heaven. . . ." He gazed into her wet, reddened eyes a moment and then looked toward the blinding lights, into the darkness. "This is the show where we ask the question, 'This time, did you get it right?' Ladies and gentlemen, this is 'The Times of Your Lives!'"

During the applause and the thumping, exciting music, the host helped the frightened woman into one of the deep, cushioned chairs. He then positioned himself at center stage, his white suit gleaming under the lights, and grinned and waved at the audience while the huge words *The Times of Your Lives!* appeared and disappeared in midair beside him.

"Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we have a special show with three special contestants from the twentieth century. The first you have already met, from 1989, Miss Arlene Brown!" He held out his arm and turned and looked at her while the audience cheered and applauded.

Arlene huddled in the chair like a small animal and stared into the blackness beyond the lights.

"We'll get to know her better in a few minutes, but now, let's meet our two other contestants."

At the right of the set, between two falls of pink and white begonias, a wide door slid open, and there stood the hostette in a glittering sheath of gold fish scale. Her teeth were white as paper, and she glowed with assurance and delight. On her arm was a young man in his early twenties, clad in a baggy, mud-browed uniform and leg-wrappings. His head, which lolled dangerously around on his shoulders, had what appeared to be a small red pillbox attached above one ear.

To loud applause, the hostette walked the unconscious young man to Mr. Michael's side and then exited herself.

"This," said the host, reaching up and putting his hand on the red module on the side of the man's head, "from 1915, is Mr. Joe Matka." He yanked the red thing away, and Joe opened his sleepy eyes and then looked down at his hands.

"Hunh," he said, turning his hands over and then looking up at Mr. Michael's face. "Hunh. What's all this?"

"This is 'The Times of Your Lives!,' Mr. Matka, and you are in for some big surprises!"

"I guess I am," he said with no particular expression.

The audience applauded, and the band played a few measures of the theme music while Mr. Michael led Joe up to sit next to Arlene, who still cowered and held her hands up to cover her nose and mouth.

"Our final contestant is from 1953. Will you please bring out Mr. Charlie Willis!"

The side doors parted, and from between the falls of begonias, the hostette showed her white teeth again and led forward the shuffling, unconscious Mr. Willis. He was good-looking man in his late thirties, dressed in a double-breasted gray suit, and on the side of his head, in his black hair, was another of the bright red plastic modules.

Mr. Michael put his hand on the device, said, "Ladies and gentlemen,

make Mr. Willis feel welcome!", and with a sweeping motion, yanked the module away.

The audience applauded, and Mr. Willis's eyes popped open, and without moving his head, his eyes turned from side to side.

"What is this shit?" he said in a monotone between his motionless lips.

"This, Mr. Willis," the host announced expansively, "is 'The Times of Your Lives!'"

"Hot damn," Mr. Willis said grimly.

The music sprang to life and throbbed and hummed while the hostette seated Mr. Willis in the third comfy chair and Mr. Michael sat behind his black basalt desk. The desk had a ribbed front, like the roped hair of an Egyptian queen, and behind Mr. Michael, through a wide glass, were smears and strings of stars on a black sky.

"Now," said Mr. Michael smoothly, "I'll bet that our three contestants are just as curious as they can be about what is happening to them . . . aren't you, Ms. Brown, Mr. Matka, Mr. Willis?"

"I guess," Joe Matka said slowly.

Arlene Brown still held her hands to her face. She nodded minutely, and Mr. Willis glared.

"This is the show where we ask the question, 'This time, did you get it right?' and —"

"Where are we?" Mr. Willis barked. "Is this TV? Are we on TV? I never said you could put me on TV."

"What's TV?" Joe Matka asked as he stared wide-eyed into the air.

Arlene made tiny squeaking noises into her hands.

"Isn't this fascinating, ladies and gentlemen?" Mr. Michael said toward the audience. "Here we have the three faces of the twentieth century — the aggressive quest for answers, passivity when confronting the incomprehensible, and the face of unmitigated fear." Mr. Michael turned again to the three contestants. "My friends," he said, "you are very lucky."

"Yeah, we're all just as lucky as dog food," Charlie Willis snorted. "How about some answers, Slick?"

"You bet. Mr. Matka, what is the last thing you remember?"

Joe Matka sat there as though he hadn't heard. After ten seconds, he said, "I got blown up." He paused. "I got gassed, then I got my, um, stomach shot open, then I was blown up." He looked toward Mr. Michael with only the slightest trace of puzzlement on his face. "I got fixed up?"

"No, Mr. Matka, you died, blown apart right there in Flanders. You did what you were told, as you had always done, and for your unswerving obedience, you got to see what your intestines looked like. Didn't you?"

"I sure did," he said slowly. "I took my orders, and then I got blown right up." He shook his head. "I always been told to do what I been told, because I don't make my own decisions all that good. But I don't mind, you know?" He thought a second. "That bullet musta come at me sideways, like from over this side —" (He drew a line across his middle with an index finger.) "— and then kinda unzipped me, b'cause I just, well, I mean, everything just kinda *fell outta* me. And then I heard this shell coming in, and that was all she wrote. I got blown up."

"You certainly did. Now, Mr. Willis, what is your last memory?"

His face was dark and hardened. "What is this shit? Where are we?"

"Does the Coalinga Main Street Hotel ring a bell, Mr. Willis?"

He said nothing. His face, if anything, grew darker, grimmer, and his shoulders began to hump up behind his head.

"Coalinga Main Street Hotel in California, August 8, 1953, balancing your accounts, and your sample case of men's and women's underwear? Ring a bell?"

"I had indigestion there once," Mr. Willis grumbled.

"You had a heart attack there, Mr. Willis. Mr. Willis, ladies and gentlemen, was a traveling salesman, and while balancing his accounts in room 37 of the Coalinga Main Street Hotel, he had a heart attack, slumped over, and died with his head lying on his samples of men and women's underwear. How would you characterize the town of Coalinga, Mr. Willis?"

Mr. Willis stared at his hands in his lap.

"Nice town? A lively town? How could you rate it as a place to die, Mr. Willis?"

He looked up from his hands, his eyes wide and bright. "It's a goddamn pit in the middle of noplac. I sold underwear in places nobody else'd bother to go to, so everyplace I went was a goddamn pit in the middle of noplac. I made gas money — that's all — and I died with my face on a pair of goddamn boxer shorts that nobody with any sense would buy. And I died in Coalinga, for God's sake. Jesus."

"You sound a bit discouraged by your choice of occupation."

Charlie Willis snorted. "Shi. . . ."

"And now, Ms. Brown?"

She cringed and tried to make herself smaller in the chair.

"Ms. Brown's last memory," said Mr. Michael to the audience, "is of lying in an empty bathtub and opening her wrists with a double-edged razor blade. Would you like to tell our audience why you did this?"

She shook her head no, no, no.

"Ms. Brown took her life because a man at her place of employment told several people that he had had intercourse with her."

Arlene drew up her knees and tried to hide her face.

"Arlene is a bit shy. She left home at the age of twenty-three, but only because her mother forced her to leave, got her first job when she was twenty-five, and was dead the next year because, in general, she couldn't take the pressure of having to talk to people."

"So if we're dead," Mr. Willis said loudly as he stood up, "why do we have to sit here and listen to you crap off to everyone about what losers we were, huh? This is TV, right? And it makes you feel good to have that poor woman suffer in front of thousands of people, am I right? You're a jerk. And I'm outta here."

"What's TV?" Mr. Matka asked no one in particular.

"If you want to die for good, Mr. Willis," the host said affably, "go through that door to your left, between those flowers."

Mr. Willis paused, looked around, and sat back down. "Just tell me where in hell we are," he grumbled. "Is this the future, or what?"

"My three dear friends," Mr. Michael said, "this is not the future. This is where you would be if you had, say, turned left at Thursday. You're not *elsewhere*, you're *elsewhen*, and we can do amazing things." Mr. Michael's eyes sparkled. "We can give you what you most desire," he intoned in a voice that was both firm yet reassuring. "Now, Ms. Brown, you will have to speak your mind here, in front of me and everyone else. If you were going to live your life over again, what would you like to be different?"

Arlene Brown writhed in her chair, and between whines and mewls, the word finally came forth: "Braver."

"Done," said Mr. Michael. "Mr. Willis? If you could do all of it over again, what would you want to be different?"

"This is crap."

"And you've died and I haven't, Mr. Willis. Under these circumstances, one would think you might tolerate a wider spectrum of possibilities

than you did previously. Pretend it's a legitimate question, Mr. Willis. Anything you'd change?"

"Yeah, I'd change the world from being such a puke-hole where you don't bust your buns selling underwear and then die with your head in a suitcase."

"Please, Mr. Willis. Even I, Mr. Michael, can't change the world!" Titters came from the audience. "But might you not like to go back to the same world with something a little different about, say, *yourself*?"

Mr. Willis's mouth changed shape several times, as though he were speaking to himself without opening his lips. "I'd go back for a million bucks."

"No problem. Mr. Matka? Anything about yourself you'd like to change, if you could live your life over again?"

"Two million," Mr. Willis said quickly.

"Done. Mr. Matka? Changes?"

"Well," he drawled, "I figured you were going to ask me that, and so I been thinking about it. And what I figure would make my life a considerable amount easier, and what would prob'ly not end up with getting me blowed up, was if I was a tad bit smarter. You know?"

"A 'tad bit' smarter?" said Mr. Michael.

"Ask to be a goddamn genius," Mr. Willis said.

"Well . . . I don't know if I want to be a genius, but maybe if I could be pretty smart, though. . . ."

"I understand, Mr. Matka. I understand. I know just what you mean."

Mr. Matka smiled and nodded his large head. "Thank you, sir."

"And now," said Mr. Michael in a booming voice, "*now* we come to the human drama of 'The Times of Your Lives!'" He seriousnessed up his face and gazed sternly at the contestants. "My friends, we are now going to send you back to the beginnings of your respective lives and allow you to live them through once more — *except*," he said, waving a finger at them, "*except*, this time, you, Mr. Willis, will go back the child of wealthy parents, and you will never have less than \$2 million. And you, Mr. Matka, will be very bright, from the day you are born. And you, Ms. Brown, will be outgoing, vivacious and unafraid of social interaction."

Mr. Michael's face broke into a huge grin, and he saluted the contestants. "Farewell — you have your lives to live! You will never know

“Farewell — you have your lives to live! You will never know you were here.”

you were here. But when we see you again, it will seem as though only minutes have passed. My friends — good luck!”

Mr. Michael waved to the band, which began to play “Thirteen Blackbirds,” a popular yet meandering tune. During thunderous applause, the hostette ushered the three contestants back through the wide sliding door, between the luxurious falls of pink and white begonias, and out of sight.

Mr. Michael raised his hands for silence, and when he got it, he said in a quiet, sly voice, “Now, those of you who have previously watched ‘The Times of Your Lives!’ know there are a few surprises in store for our contestants! To be sure, we play fair with them, but what they do not know is that since our contestants are selected from different time periods of the twentieth century, Mr. Matka may very well change the course of history so that Mr. Willis’s millions may be worthless — or worth twice as much. And by the time Mr. Willis has lived his life, who knows what the world will be like for Ms. Brown.” Mr. Michael grinned at his audience. “So don’t you go away now.”

The band played soft doodling music as studio lights came on and the audience stood and stretched and moved about for a few minutes before settling back in their chairs. Then the band played the vigorous theme music again, much louder this time to get everyone’s attention. The studio lights dimmed over the audience and brightened on the stage. The potted plants seemed to glow out of their greenness.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, while you take the cortiplug from the back of the seat in front of you and hook in, I want to once again thank our friends at Quantex/Syntheticort for the use of their Side-Time scan-compressors, without which this show would take ninety years.”

A few ripples of laughter spread through the rustling of people reaching forward and sticking the cortiplugins into the sides of their heads.

“Are we ready?” Mr. Michael asked grandly. “Now then, just as he lives it, let us meet the new Mr. Joe Matka!”

As Joe Matka lived through the days of his life in some cross-time dimension, his scanned and compressed life was fed into the brains of the

studio audience and into the brains of audiences around the world at the rate of five years per minute — yet it seemed as unhurried and normal to them as a slow bath by candlelight:

Joey Matka was born in a plain-faced white house with a weedy yard and a hitching rail by the front step. Five-year-old Joey played with his black dog Skits in the fields behind the house. Then young Joe built wooden toys in his father's workshop when he was seven, and hung around Casey's garage with Skits and watched the men in overalls while they worked on Mr. Branson's Duryea automobile. "How does it work?" he timidly asked Mr. Branson. Then, after a long talk one October evening at the kerosene-lamp-lit dinner table, his parents agreed that since he was fourteen, he was old enough that he could stay over at Mr. and Mrs. Branson's three days a week to drive them around and keep their Duryea repaired. At sixteen, just fooling around, he invented an automatic bread toaster, and with it carefully packed in a wooden box, he went to Kansas City to interest the General Electric Company in it. They were interested, bought it from him for two hundred dollars, hired him after they got permission from his parents, and let him putter in their shops with Skits at his heels. Within two years he had invented the arc welder, the electric-arc searchlight, the electrostatic generator, and on commission from the government, invented, at the age of nineteen, the military tank. He was too valuable to send to fight the Kaiser or to stay in Kansas City. Now wealthy beyond his dreams, he and Skits went to New York, secluded themselves, drew, designed, and invented. For quick cash, he invented the electric razor, secluded himself more deeply, hired sixteen assistants, and in 1921 presented to the New York Academy of Sciences a demonstration whereby a narrow beam of green light burned a quarter-inch hole in an iron plate. "I call it a 'phazer,'" he said. The U.S. Army turned his phazer into a death ray, occupied Cuba and northern Mexico; and when Skits died in 1924, Joe Matka packed his dog's still-warm body into a wooden crate, took it on board his 28-foot sailboat, and sailed toward Greenland. Five hours later, long after dark, Joe steered his boat steadily east, watching the dim glow of his compass. Then, in the dark, with the only sound the slap and wash of waves against the side of his boat, he connected several thin wires to a junction box, flipped a switch, and vaporized in a yellow flash, along with four hundred cubic yards of seawater.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen," said the soothing voice of Mr. Michael through the electro-cortical connections, "is the new story of Mr. Joe Matka. And how does this change the life of Mr. Willis?"

* * *

Charles Anthony Willis, only child of the town's only millionaire, screamed into the world at 4:55 P.M., July 19, 1910, in a back bedroom of an eleven-room brick-and-ivy home on the outskirts of El Dorado Springs, Missouri. At age five, with his dour little face pressed against the side of his BB gun, he shot birds with a steady hand; he had a paper route at six, and at seven had two dozen chickens of his own, the eggs from which he sold to neighbors along the street, who thought he was "enterprising." At seventeen he was managing his father's shoe factory, and was the first person in town to own an automatic toaster. Married at nineteen, divorced at twenty-one, he became more dour ("Moody," his mother said), and decided that money was more important than love. He invested in electric home appliances and electric research. He did little with the rest of his life except accumulate money and invest heavily in the dynamic electronics industries of the late thirties. In 1953 he died in Reno, in bed with Glorina Wilcox, a blonde with very long legs, while watching *The Schizmatics*, a sleaze group, on the latest model of a dimensional TV. He died smiling.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," said the inter-cortical voice of Mr. Michael, "we present to you the new life of our final contestant, Ms. Arlene Brown."

Arlene was born looking around herself. Her infant face was inscrutable, but by the time she could talk, she had announced to her astonished mother and father that she had decided that she wanted to become a tri-vid star like the famous Marilyn Mortenson. From this, she never wavered. She took dance, singing, and acting lessons; and what she could not do to her satisfaction, she did with a delightful enthusiasm; and at her first audition for *The Queen of Outer Space*, the director hired her and instructed his staff of writers to expand her part. She was offered a three-movie contract. She accepted, and changed her name to Sylvia Romilar. Her face became known around the world. *Surf the Sky*, her second film, was, in 1979, the first movie shown on two worlds simultaneously, on Earth and at Ares One, the first Mars base. She fell in love in 1981 with one Walter Wroscocoe, a breeder of unusual dogs, but because of her renown, their privacy was nonexistent, and they saw each other only infrequently. The more she wanted privacy, the more the gossip predators followed her, reporting on everything from the contents of her garbage, how often she shaved her legs and the details of even more personal habits, to what she ate and when. She raged at them. She shot at them and was requested to not do that again, but she did anyway, and one reporter was wounded and was famous until he recovered. She tried to run. They found her. She tried to hide. On the edge of the Sahara, in a

small village, in a two-room whitewashed cottage, she looked at the cot on which she was about to sleep. A thin wire ran down one of its metal legs — a tiny microphone had been attached to the bed even before her arrival. She returned home, snarling mad, and trusted no one. "My ambition has ruined my life," she sneered. "I should have been born autistic." She and Walter Wroscocoe slowly concocted a play whereby they would make a publicity visit to the far-side Moonbase Peace-Mir, the Cosmotron research center, and lock themselves in one of the greenhouses — but she was a star, and media predators were highly paid to be ahead of her, which they were. Secret cameras followed her and Walter every second of the way from three different angles, and the world stayed at home, hoping to see them making amorous moves on each other. But Sylvia/Arlene and Walter played their predesigned roles as famous tourists until they were moonside, when they shoved their two escorts aside and locked themselves inside Greenhouse Beta. She took a pencil-drill from her black jumpsuit and jammed the locking mechanism of the three doors. Now they thought they were at least alone and unobserved. From three angles, two worlds watched and held their breath. Next door, at the Cosmotron facility, technicians watched Sylvia and Walter touch, embrace, kiss, and grow passionate. One technician, a tall, wild-eyed man with thinning hair and a name badge that read "R. Dyook," grew irrational with lust and jealousy that this Walter Something was having his way with the woman of R. Dyook's dreams. Dyook became possessed with fury as Walter slipped his hand inside Sylvia/Arlene's unzipped suit-top and touched her breasts, and before Dyook's violence could be restrained, he accidentally activated the Cosmotron load/run sequence while the vaporization chamber contained certain items of testing equipment that provided a wealth of decaying quarkonium and anti-gluons. Amidst much yelling, and while next door Sylvia/Arlene and Walter obviously pressed their bodies together as virtually everyone on Earth and Marsbase Ares watched, while this happened, at some far point on the circuit of the Cosmotron, out beyond the rugged mountains, somewhere many kilometers away, two anti-gluons sped through the magni-coils at the speed of light, nudged a quarkoid cluster, and the false vacuum of the universe was revealed for what it was: the thinnest tissue of connective illusion. Quicker than instantaneously, everywhere was everywhere, and then it was gone.

"Well," said Mr. Michael, "we've never had a life before that had *that* kind of impact, have we? Wasn't this an interesting one? Let's bring them all back, shall we, ladies and gentlemen? Let's give all three contestants a great big hand and ask them if *this time . . . if this time, they got it right!* Bring them on in!" Mr. Michael pronounced as the audience applauded thunderously.

Joe and Charlie walked weak-kneed and looked troubled, knowing what they had just been subjected to, but they did not look confused, as they had before. Sylvia/Arlene walked in behind them, wide-eyed and defiant, and still wearing the black jumpsuit that Walter Wroscoc had unzipped and inserted his hand into.

The smiling hostette ushered them to the three deeply padded chairs beside Mr. Michael's basalt desk. Joe and Charlie slumped exhausted in the chairs, but Sylvia/Arlene stood there, her back to the audience, glaring at Mr. Michael.

"Please, Ms. Brown, have a seat," Mr. Michael said with great charm as he gestured at the empty chair. "Tell us what you think. This time, did you get it right?"

"This is some kind of theological exercise, isn't it?" Joe mumbled.

"Please, Ms. Brown," Mr. Michael said. "Do have a seat."

"It's Sylvia Romilar, and I'll be glad to tell you what I think. You make us run through our lives like rats through mazes — you make us work and suffer for your amusement."

"Yeah," Charlie Willis grunted. "I got to be what I wanted to be, and I was a waste. A jerk."

"But Ms. Romilar, tell me: this time, did you get it right?"

"Right doesn't have anything to do with it. I don't mind living a life where everything's up for grabs, but like Charlie said, when we got to choose parts of our lives, everything got out of balance. We turned into cartoons. We were fools for your amusement."

"I was better off getting blowed up," Joe said. "Everybody was better off with me being stupid."

"As for my first crappy little nowhere life," Sylvia said, "it was something I worked at. It was a random gift, and I dealt with it the best way I could. My first life was all mine. Pointless as it was, I built it and it was *mine*. And it meant a lot more to me than that redesigned rat run you just put me through."

"Yeah," Charlie said. "Doing it 'right' doesn't have anything to do with it. Doing it on my own does. You stacked the goddamned deck."

"But wasn't it interesting?!"

"Human beings aren't smart enough to make that kind of choice," Joe said. "If they don't have to work at being who they are, they're . . . fools for your amusement. Look at Mozart."

"Yes, Mr. Mozart was our guest last month. Very interesting opinions," Mr. Michael said, pressing a manicured finger to his temple, as though to contain the immensity of his interest.

"What're you going to do with us now?" Joe asked the beatific Mr. Michael. "Make us go through it again with some new conditions? What do we have to pay to get out of this?"

"Pay? Pay nothing! And no, you aren't going to have to do it again. You ended that timeline, Ms. Romilar. You've all got to live twice, so now we're going to put you back where we got you."

"You're going to make us die again," Joe said dully.

"Well," said Mr. Michael, "I wouldn't want to say 'die' but —"

Sylvia reached inside her jumpsuit, pulled out the pencil-drill, and in one smooth movement, reached across and slid it through Mr. Michael's shirt, under his breastbone, and up into his heart. She held it there three or four long seconds, giving it little pushes and staring straight into his eyes. Then she stepped back, put her hands on her hips again, and glared at the spluttering Mr. Michael. "What — What —" he gurgled.

"But isn't it interesting?" Sylvia asked him.

Mr. Michael stood up behind his ribbed basalt desk, staring down at his pouring wound. "I knew this would happen," he said calmly. He stretched out his arms and said into the ceiling lights, "I knew one day this would happen, but I will live again in another timeline!"

"I hope so," Sylvia said bitterly. "I hope you get everything you want."

The pencil-drill dangled from his chest and whirled erratically.

"I — knew this would happen," he said breathily. "But I have — faith."

"Did you know *this* would happen?" Sylvia asked as she spread her fingers, placed her hand over his face, and gave him a brisk backward shove.

Attendants and technicians rushed onto the stage to seize the contestants, and, as many hands held Sylvia, Mr. Michael fell into his chair and tipped over backward. When he finally stopped thrashing, over the top of his elegant basalt desk, one could see a bit of white ankle-skin between his black sock and his pant cuff.

The Host was a pale, strange-looking man with a tall forehead and eyes as featureless as globules of black oil. Mr. Michael stood next to the Host, dazed, with the inactive drill still hanging out of his chest.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," said the Host resonantly, "to 'The Fourth Time Around'! Now, Mr. Michael, I'll bet you never thought *this* would happen!"

"No," Mr. Michael mumbled, shaking his head. He looked up at the overhead lights as a rat in a maze might look up into the glare of realization that, even if he got it right this time, the reward could be only death, and he was afraid.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE HORSE UNDER THE HOOD

ON SEPTEMBER 18, 1957 I received a letter from the late Robert P. Mills, who was then editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and its sister-magazine, *Venture Science Fiction*. He wanted to know whether I would be willing to write a short science column for *Venture*.

Yes, I would. Of course!

For several years, I had been writing occasional science articles for *Astounding Science Fiction* and I had enjoyed it, but I hated having to get approval for each article first and then having to risk a rejection. (I'm funny that way.) Bob offered to let me have a free hand as long as I didn't miss a deadline.

Good! I promptly wrote an article and it appeared in the January 1958 issue of *Venture*. That was the 7th issue of the magazine. I then wrote three more articles which appeared in the 8th, 9th, and 10th issues of the magazine. But with the 10th,

the July 1958 issue, the magazine ceased publication.

My days as a science columnist had ended so quickly, and just as I was getting into the swing of it, too. I was chagrined.

Then, on August 12, 1958, I had lunch with Bob in New York, and he asked me if I would continue the column after all, but for *F & SF*.

I agreed at once without bothering to conceal my glee. I was back in business on the same terms as before — an absolutely free hand provided I did not miss a deadline.

The magazine and I both held to the agreement. My first column appeared in the November 1958 *F & SF*, and I went on, issue after issue since then. The magazine never objected, not even once, to my choice of subject, or offered to change a word, and I never missed a deadline regardless of family crises, bouts of ill health, or whatever.

In any case, the point of all this is that this essay that you are now

reading is my 360th. With the October 1988 issue, I complete thirty years of my column. Next month is the column's 30th anniversary, and with it I will start my thirty-first year.

I just thought I'd mention it. And tell you that some of you out there may be tired of the column, but I'm not. I'm shooting for another thirty years, so here goes —

The horse has been a servant to man ever since about 2000 B.C., when the nomads of central Asia tamed it.

In some ways, it is an ideal animal. For a combination of speed and strength, there is nothing like a horse. Anything bigger and stronger, such as a rhinoceros, is slower; anything faster, such as an antelope, is smaller and weaker.

On the other hand, anatomically it leaves something to be desired, if it is compared with the ox, which was the most useful prehorse animal when it came to work. The ox is stupid, placid, uncomplaining, strong, and has huge hulking shoulders with which to push. It is also terribly slow.

A horse is built otherwise. Its shoulders are narrow, and if it must pull, there has to be a broad strip of hide crossing the horse's chest. Under those circumstances, when a horse pulls hard, it succeeds in

closing its windpipe. So a horse doesn't pull hard — neither would you in its place.

But the central Asian nomads reduced the job of pulling to a minimum. They devised a chariot that was little more than a platform on an axle between two large spoked wheels. Two men stood on the platform, one to control the horse, and one to handle the weapons.

In the centuries after 2000 B.C., the charioteers swept down upon the settled civilizations of the time and defeated them all, from China to Egypt. There was no standing up to the charging chariots until the conquered peoples learned to use the horse themselves.

In the next three thousand years and more, the horse remained an indispensable adjunct of the aristocracy. And there were many improvements, too. The chariot went out of fashion once horses were bred that were sufficiently large and strong to bear the weight of a heavy man and still be able to run fleetly.

Stirrups were invented so that a rider could stick his boots into them and sit firmly. That meant he could thrust with his spear without pushing himself off the back of the horse.

Horseshoes were invented, which protected the delicate hooves of a horse and kept him from turn-

ing up lame every other day.

About 1000 A.D., the horsecollar was invented, which gave the horse a pair of artificial shoulders to push with, so that for the first time he could pull with full strength. That made him into a superior work animal about the farm. He was the ideal animal to pull improved plows, so that the food supply in north-western Europe was increased many-fold.

Eventually, coaches were devised that made it possible for people without horses to travel at horse speed according to set schedules, but the coaches were pulled by horses, of course. There were carriages-for-hire, reapers, omnibuses — all pulled by horses.

All the way down to the closing decades of the 19th Century, a galloping horse was as fast as a man could go overland, and life without horses seemed unthinkable.

That didn't mean that people didn't dream of impossible improvements. The winged horse, Pegasus, is the most charming creature in Greek mythology. In the Arabian Nights, there was an object that flew by turning a peg, but it is in the shape of a wooden horse. Of course, the Greek myths have Daedalus flying on artificial wings, and the Arabian Nights have flying carpets, too.

But in 1769, Watt's steam engine came into being, and, for the first time, human beings didn't need fantasies. They had a reasonably efficient way of drawing upon the inanimate energy of burning fuel. By 1781, Watt had improved his device to make it possible for it to bring about rotary motion, and, by turning wheels, it could power mill-machinery — and transportation devices.

In 1807, the first commercially viable steamship came into being and, in 1825, the first commercially viable steam locomotive.

The steamships were fine, but steam locomotives were clearly lacking in versatility as land transportation. The locomotive required rails and could only travel on those rails. Furthermore, it was only economical as a large device carrying much goods or many people.

Was there no way to personalize the locomotive? Could it not be made small to accommodate an individual, or a small family? Could it not be independent of rails, so that it could go anywhere an ordinary road could take it?

In short, what was wanted was a private carriage, which a wealthy man could own, or a commercial carriage for hire, which a man of moderate means could use — but *without a horse*. A "horseless carriage," in other words.

Even before Watt's steam engine, people had dreamed of horseless carriages. They thought of them as powered by sails (but you would then have to depend on the fickle wind). They also thought of clock-work devices (which you would then have to wind up with considerable effort).

Steam did away with all that. Once Watt's steam engine came into being, people thought only of "steam carriages." Steam carriages were indeed built, and some of them indeed worked, but there were enormous problems.

They tended to be heavy. No matter how you skimped on the carriage itself, a steam carriage had to carry a big, strong boiler. What's more, the boiler had to be fed fuel, so usually a steam carriage had to have a platform behind for the stoker, who would keep feeding the fire. The water would boil away steadily and you would have to stop frequently to fill up on additional water. What's more, you couldn't start till you had heated the water to boiling and worked up a head of steam, and if you've ever waited for a trivial kettle of water to boil so that you can have a cup of tea, you know that waiting for water to boil can be tedious. And once you did start, the steam carriage was likely to lumber along like a laden ox.

Nor did the various horse-related industries, the coach owners, for instance, sit idly by. They claimed that the vehicles would scare the horses, and that was a powerful argument. No one wanted to ride on a panicky runaway horse, or be in a coach pulled by same.

Even the public was hostile. The steam carriages tended to tear up the roads and fill the air with noise and steam. In Great Britain, so hostile was Parliament that, in 1865, they passed a "red-flag law," that kept all steam carriages to a top speed of four miles an hour in rural areas (the speed of a brisk walk) and two miles an hour in towns. What's more, someone with a red flag had to walk along in front of the steam carriage so that people would be warned of its approach. The law wasn't repealed till 1896.

Even so, inventors worked doggedly to make steam carriages more efficient and commercial. By 1900, there were "flash boilers" that allowed one to build a head of steam quickly. The machines were made lighter, simpler, and faster.

Two brothers, Francis Edgar Stanley (1849-1918) and Freelan O. Stanley (1849-1940), began to manufacture steam carriages in 1897, producing the famous "Stanley Steamer." In 1906, they produced a steam carriage that broke the world record for speed. It went a mile in

18.2 seconds, which is equivalent to a speed of 127 miles per hour. However, the steam carriage was overtaken by events. Something better had come along.

The steam engine is an "external-combustion engine." That is, the fuel is burned outside the engine to produce steam and the steam then enters the engine where its pressure moves the piston.

Naturally, it occurred to some people that matters would be improved if the fuel were somehow burned inside the cylinder housing the piston, so that the energy of the chemical combination could move the piston directly. That would be an "internal-combustion engine."

With an internal-combustion engine, there wouldn't have to be a large water boiler within which to make steam. There would be no heat lost in bringing the boiler and water to the steaming point. Furthermore, a vehicle would start instantly when fuel was burning in the cylinder; there would be no need to wait for the water to boil and a head of steam to build up.

But what would the fuel be? Obviously, you can't stick slivers of wood or bits of coal into the cylinder. You need inflammable vapors that will mix with air and explode readily when detonated with, say, an electric spark. That

means gases — or, possibly, liquids that are easily evaporated and give off gases at ordinary temperatures.

As early as 1820, someone built an engine intended to work on exploding mixtures of hydrogen and oxygen, but it wasn't commercially useful.

The first internal-combustion engine that could be viewed as even remotely practical was built in 1859 by a Belgian-French inventor, Jean-Joseph Etienne Lenoir (1822-1900). He used illuminating gas as a fuel, the kind of gas that in those days was obtained by heating coal in the absence of air, forcing inflammable vapors to be given off.

In 1860, Lenoir inserted his engine in a small conveyance and put-putted it around the streets. This was the first "motor carriage" (as distinguished from a steam carriage) or, in briefer form, the first motor car.

The engine was very primitive and inefficient, however, making use of only about 4 percent of the burning fuel. Still, in the course of five years, Lenoir sold 300 of his engines.

The piston in the Lenoir engine was a "two-stroke" device, in and out, but, in 1862, a French engineer, Alphonse Eugene Beau de Rochas (1815-1893), pointed out that much greater efficiency would result from the use of a "four-stroke" device.

1) The piston would push outward, creating a partial vacuum and sucking in a mixture of inflammable vapor and air.

2) The piston would move inward, compressing the mixture.

3) Ignition at maximum compression would explode the mixture and drive the piston outward. That would be the "power stroke" that delivers the impulse that turns the wheels.

4) The piston would move inward again, expelling the products of combustion.

After that, the piston moves outward again, sucking in a new mixture of vapors and air, and the cycle proceeds over again — and again — indefinitely.

Describing this in a theoretical way is one thing. Actually building a device that incorporates these ideas and making it all work in a useful and practical way is quite another. Beau de Rochas didn't try to put his ideas into practice. Nor did anyone else over the next fourteen years.

In 1876, however, a German inventor, Nikolaus August Otto (1832-1891) built one that actually worked. As a result, the four-stroke cycle is sometimes called the "Otto cycle," and internal-combustion engines making use of the Otto cycle are sometimes called "Otto engines."

Otto patented his engine in 1877 and formed a company that sold 35,000 such engines in a few years. It was clearly the best internal-combustion engine that had been designed and, by 1890, it was the only one.

Next came the matter of building a vehicle with an Otto engine that would run more efficiently than Lenoir's vehicle.

The first to do this was a German mechanical engineer, Carl Friedrich Benz (1844-1929). He mounted the engine in the back of something that looked very much like a buggy. It had three bicycle wheels, a small one front center, and two large ones on either side in the back.

Not only did Benz make use of an Otto engine, but his fuel was gasoline, and that is worth a small digression.

Kerosene and gasoline are both obtained from petroleum. Kerosene is made up of hydrocarbons with ten to twelve carbon atoms per molecule. Gasoline is made up of smaller molecules containing only 4 to 8 carbon atoms.

This means that gasoline has a lower boiling point than kerosene does and vaporizes much more easily. In fact, it is because it gives off vapors of inflammable gas so readily that it is called gasoline. Of course, that means it is inevitably

abbreviated as "gas," which it isn't. It is a volatile liquid. The word came into use in the 1870's.

The French call gasoline "essence de petrol," meaning "extract of petroleum," which it is, but then they abbreviate it to "essence," which seems foolish. The British, just to be contrary, borrowed the French expression and abbreviated it to "petrol."

Whatever you call it, though, gasoline is too vaporous and too ready to explode to be used in a lamp. You need the more decorous and quiet kerosene for that purpose. On the other hand, kerosene wouldn't work in an Otto engine for it doesn't give off enough vapors. There we want gasoline.

And so it came about that just as the electric light was killing the kerosene lamp, and it looked as though petroleum would become a drug on the market, the coming of gasoline powered motorcars gave petroleum a new lease on life. A new and *better* lease on life, for more gasoline was gobbled up, by far, in the new cars, then lamps could consume kerosene. The entire process of petroleum refinement switched from converting as much of it as possible into kerosene, to converting as much of it as possible into gasoline.

That answers the question with which I concluded last month's

essay, as to how the petroleum industry could survive the decline of the kerosene lamp. However, as long as we're on the subject of motor cars, let's continue —

Benz built his first three wheeler in early 1885. It was a "gas buggy" (an American slang term for the motor car) almost literally. Also, since it had an Otto engine and used gasoline as fuel, it was the first representative of what we today call an "automobile."

The word came into use just before the time when Benz's device was built, and it is an uncomfortable one. "Auto-" means "self" and "-mobile" means "moving," so "automobile" means "self-moving" (no horse, that is), and that surely sounds like a great description. The trouble is, however, that "auto" is from Greek and "mobile" is from Latin, and mixing the two languages in this fashion is a no-no for linguistic purists.

In proper Greek, the device should be an "autokinesis," and in proper Latin, it would be an "ipse-mobile." The chance, however, of doing anything about this is precisely zero. Automobile it is, and automobile it will stay, and Benz was its inventor.

Benz ran his first automobile around a cinder track right next to his factory. He made four laps

before something broke, and he only stalled twice. His wife and his workmen ran around the track with the automobile in wild excitement.

Benz made his first public run in the autumn of 1885, and either forgot how to steer, or had trouble doing so, for he ran into a wall. He made his first sale in 1887, flourished and, in 1890, began to manufacture fourwheelers.

Second in the field was another German inventor, Gottlieb Wilhelm Daimler (1834-1900). Daimler had worked with Otto at first, but left him in 1883 because he found Otto too conservative in his outlook.

Daimler constructed a high-speed engine, making it lighter and more efficient, and he also used gasoline as a fuel. He fitted such an engine to a boat in 1883 and had the first motorboat. In 1885, he fitted an engine to a bicycle and had the first motorcycle.

He built his first automobile in 1887, which put him two years behind Benz, but his automobile was a fourwheeler at the start, which put him three years ahead of Benz in that respect. What's more, his automobile was the first to have the engine in front, and the horse, so to speak, was finally under the hood.

In the United States, an inventor, George Baldwin Selden (1846-1922), claimed priority because he had

obtained a patent for an automobile design as early as 1879. However, all he had was the design. He didn't build an automobile.

The first American gasoline-powered automobile actually built was devised by Charles Edgar Duryea (1861-1938). Duryea drove his car on the streets of Springfield, Illinois on September 22, 1893.

To begin with, the automobile was an expensive toy that might easily have developed into something meant exclusively for the amusement of the world's rich (like yachts). Some, however, made efforts to produce automobiles cheaply.

One step in that direction was the establishment of part interchangeability, of making every part so exactly to specification that any part could be used in any automobile. This was a practice used in other industries, but the American engineer Henry Martyn Leland (1843-1932) was the first to apply it successfully to automobiles.

He built the first Cadillac, in 1903, and, in 1908, he put on a show in which three Cadillacs were disassembled, the parts mixed up, and some replaced from dealers' stocks. Three Cadillacs were assembled out of the mess and were driven 500 miles without trouble.

A revolution, however, came with the American engineer Henry

Ford (1863-1947). He built his first automobile in 1893 and founded a company for the manufacture of automobiles of his own design.

He was intent on making cars cheaply, and he tried eight designs which he labelled by various letters: Model A, Model B, and so on. The eighth he called Model S. Those models which were cheaper sold better.

In 1908, Ford got the idea of the assembly line. The parts moved along a belt and went to the workmen, rather than vice-versa. Each man in line did one job and the product was then passed on to the next man who did another job and so on. At the end of the assembly line, a finished car rolled off onto the floor.

Ford used the assembly line to manufacture his ninth model, which he labelled the "Model T," and that was, by all odds, the most famous automobile in history.

It cost only \$950 to start with, but the prices steadily dropped until, in 1926, it was only \$290. (Of course, that was in 1926 dollars, which had much more buying power than our own feeble item of 1988, but it was still cheap.)

The Model T was the first car available to the middle classes, but there was still one thing about it that kept it from being truly a vehicle for everyone. In order to

start it, it had to be cranked. The engine had to be given a good hard turn in order for it to catch and, therefore, keep going on indefinitely.

I've never cranked a car myself (well, I'm not *that* old) but, in my imagination, I can see exactly how it went. You got the crank, went out to the front of the car, stuck it into the little hole under the radiator, and felt it grip a projection which it would turn and which would, in turn, turn the engine.

You then spat on your hands, got a firm grip on the crank and pushed it down with all your might and as sharply as you could. The engine would cough once or twice and die. Your lips would set more grimly and you would repeat the process and get another double cough. You might have to do it a half-dozen more times, getting sweatier and angrier and cursing more and more freely — and then, finally, it would catch, and you raced quickly into the car and put it in gear so you could get going before it died again.

To make it a little worse, the time might come when the engine caught unexpectedly — when you weren't set for it and your grip wasn't quite firm enough, or you were off balance. When that happened, the crank would manage to yank itself out of your hand, turn with the engine, coming around to

the other side of your forearm, giving it a sharp blow and possibly breaking one or both bones. I imagine that would be less fun than almost anything else about a car.

In any case, as long as a car had to be cranked, the job fell to the strongest person in the family — usually to the lord and master — and women and half-grown youngsters were out of it.

It didn't last, of course. The American engineer Charles Francis Kettering (1876-1958) invented the electric self-starter, a device in which an electrically-powered clamp gripped a projection of the engine and turned it like a relentless arm that could twist harder and longer than a human arm possibly could. The motor would catch while all you did personally was to twist a key in the dashboard into position to make contact and close a circuit.

The self-starter appeared first in the 1912 Cadillac, but it spread gradually to all the cars, even down to the cheapest, and, in the course of the 1920's, the crank disappeared and is now scarcely remembered.

With the self-starter, the automobile was driven as easily by women as by men, and by adolescents as by adults. The day of the virtual universality of the automobile had finally come.

The automobile changed American society from top to bottom. It gave rise to a nation on wheels. It offered the possibility of a home in the suburbs, for one was no longer necessarily enslaved to a house near the office or factory. It made it possible to take a vacation some place farther away than the vacationer's backyard. It helped disintegrate the family, for it was easier for children, when grown up, to find jobs at a distance (but to return for a reunion, too). It meant greater freedom for teen-agers, who could escape parental supervision by car and use it for sexual experimentation.

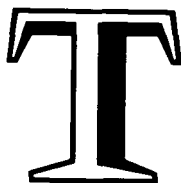
It produced a network of paved roads and gas stations and garages and built an industry on which the nation's prosperity depended and was maintained. And it also introduced us to traffic congestion, to air pollution, and to the killing and maiming of Americans by the tens and hundreds of thousands per year.

But whatever the difficulties, we can't give it up. Just to point up the universality of the automobile with a specific case, even I, a person who doesn't know which end of a hammer you saw a plank with, learned how to drive in 1950, and of all the modes of travel, I find a journey by car, with my own hands on the wheel, is by far the least unpleasant.

Lucius Shepard's welcome and compelling new story concerns a CIA agent in Calcutta who develops qualms about his job and goes in search of a goddess, only to run into some strange and violent complications. Mr. Shepard's most recent novel is LIFE DURING WARTIME (Bantam).

A WOODEN TIGER

By Lucius Shepard



HERE WAS A GODDESS IN
Katmandu named Kumari, a
living, breathing incarnation

chosen from among the daughters of wealthy Newar families — chosen by oracular sign, some said, and by political necessity, said others — and until she reached the age of puberty and a new incarnation was selected, she lived in a temple on Durbar Square, where she was worshiped and pampered and paraded before the faithful on festival days. It astonished Clement that no one apart from himself found this notable, that people dismissed Kumari's existence as an atavism left over from a simpler time, from an age when superstition had not yet been overthrown by logic. They seemed to neglect the fact that no matter how completely the phenomenon had been explained away, there *was* a goddess in Katmandu, an actual goddess whose followers numbered in the hundreds of thousands . . . and — even more remarkable, in Clement's opinion — scattered throughout the country were thirteen women who had once been Kumari and

were now shunned, deemed unlucky and thus unsuitable for marriage.

If there was one overwhelming reason that Clement was so taken with Kumari's divinity, so insistent upon its importance, it was that he needed something larger than himself on which to focus, something whose nature might afford relief from the grim realities of his profession. He was thirty-eight, a compact, muscular man with sandy hair and what seemed a permanent case of sunburn, and blue-gray eyes that in certain lights would appear colorless. His face had a bland, boyish innocence, the face of an aging athlete or a young cleric, of someone to whom duplicity and violence were shameful but minor matters; for the past three years, however, he had served as the CIA station chief in Calcutta, a position that required him to commit duplicity and violence on a grand scale. Many considered him a murderer, while others considered him a man who was doing a nasty but essential job. For his own part, Clement refused to characterize himself, because life had grown too complex for him to accept the emotionality attaching to either label. In his business, such uncertainty led inevitably to mental sloppiness and fatal error, and Clement knew he was in danger; but he had a secret that allowed him to defer hopelessness, to believe in salvation of a kind. He wasn't sure it was a real secret, but it was at the least a mystery, and in order to determine its true nature, every now and then he would take a long weekend, and — accompanied by his wife, Lily — he would travel to small Asian hill towns and wander through the markets and inquire after an elderly foreigner who carved animals out of wood.

It was during one of these trips that Clement learned of Kumari, and he asked the station chief in Katmandu, Carl Rice, to assist him in tracking down the women who had once been incarnations. Within a matter of hours, Rice — a lanky, olive-skinned Southerner, whom Clement had known for years — presented him with a list. "Most of 'em are locked away by their families," he said as they sat in the bar of the Soaltee Oteri, a simulation of a Hilton Lounge, with floors and walls of black marble, a teakwood bar, and a lethargic jazz trio presided over by a busty Japanese singer, whose accent and shrill upper register were turning "That Ol' Black Magic" into a cryptic lamentation. Rice gazed at her admiringly and wagged his fingers in a clandestine wave.

"Why they do that?" Clement asked.

Rice said, "Huh?"

"The families . . . how come they lock 'em up?"

"They're embarrassed 'bout 'em bein' unlucky. They're delighted to have a goddess in the family, but an ex-goddess . . . 'ppears they just as soon be kin to a rat. This 'un' — Rice pointed to a name — "she went insane. Couple of others are prostitutes. They'd just bullshit you. But this un', now. Cheni Abdurachan. She ran away and got herself educated. Hung out with some Westernized Tibetans. She's pretty damn Westernized herself, speaks good English. I don't know if she'll talk to you, but I can get you to 'er. Fix you up with a plane tomorrow."

Clement inspected the list and saw that Cheni was thirty years old. "Where's Tasang-partsi?"

"Mustang. We'd fly you to Ra-lung. That's a four hour walk away. I wouldn't advise takin' Lily. There's lotsa hill crime." Rice sipped his drink and studied the Japanese singer, who was striking centerfold poses. "So you want the tour?"

"Yeah, tomorrow'll be fine."

"This isn't business, is it?" asked Rice, and sipped his drink.

"Just curiosity."

"Curiosity." Rice pronounced it syllable by syllable, as if perplexed by the word. "You gettin' a weird reputation, man. People wonderin' 'bout you."

"People?" said Clement.

"You know . . . people." Rice wadded a strip of cocktail napkin between his thumb and forefinger. "Y'gotta watch your behavior. It ain't like you got a spotless record."

"You talking about D'allessandro?"

Rice shrugged and pegged the wad at the bartender.

"D'allessandro's dead," said Clement.

"Now there's two schools of thought 'bout that, ain't there?"

"I saw the fucking car blow up, man."

"Ri-ight," said Rice with a sardonic drawl.

"You got something on your mind," said Clement, annoyed, "why don't you spit it out?"

"O.K." Rice's long, bony face was imperturbable. "Here we are, six years after D'allessandro pulls off the biggest scam anybody's ever pulled on us. I mean, we're talkin' a Barnum and Bailey production. Right before his plot thickens, the man's terminated. Terrorists, looks like. But a few days

later, when the shit hits the fan, people start sayin', 'All we got here's bits and pieces. Could be our boy's done a Houdini. No way to prove it, but we got his right-hand man.' Rice poked Clement's shoulder. "Whyn't we keep him on a string and see which way he jumps?"

"Think I don't know all that?"

"You don't act like you do," said Rice. "You're becoming a goddamn eccentric. People watch you makin' these funny moves, and they start seein' hidden agendas. Anybody else was actin' like you, their ass would have been sanctioned. But what I'm leadin' up to is this. Time's a gonna come when they gonna say. 'D'allessandro's probably dead by now, anyway. So what're we gonna do with this chump we got runnin' Calcutta?"

Clement forced a grin. "But that time hasn't come. And being watched but not leashed, that gives a man a certain freedom, doesn't it?"

Rice leaned back as if trying to see him in a better light. "What're you up to?"

"Good things." Clement sucked on a piece of ice to calm his nerves. "If I'm going to keep the assholes off my back, I need to count some coup. So" — he cracked the ice — "I'm going to count me some damn coup."

Rice stared at him deadpan. "Square business?"

"Scout's honor. I'm going to give 'em a prime-time spectacular." He fingered out another ice chip. "Since this is official. . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Rice was offended.

"C'mon, pal," said Clement. "We haven't had a heart-to-heart like this in years."

Rice looked down at his drink. "Y'unnerstand it ain't like I enjoyed this shit. I don't get off on hasslin' my friends."

"That Ol' Black Magic" ended in a tortured shriek and a drum roll that covered the lack of applause; the Japanese singer announced a break.

"No problema," said Clement. "But how 'bout doing me a favor? Tell 'em I going to do big things real soon. Sell it to 'em, O.K.?"

"You got it," said Rice, the soul of sincerity. "I'll sell it hard." He glanced at the stage. "I owe you, man." He stood, patted Clement on the arm. "Hang out. . . . I'll be back in a flash with the first installment."

Clement lowered his head, slowly letting out a breath. He was going to have to pull off a big-yardage play, he thought. Find somebody useful to hand over. Somebody with political sex appeal. It was too late in the game for anything else. And probably too late for that.

"Hey, when's Lily comin' back from the market?" asked Rice, sitting back down.

"She's going to meet us for dinner."

"How you two doin', anyway? You still in love?"

"Love." Clement made a derisive noise. "It's better than love."

Rice smiled. "Miko! he called, and the Japanese singer came to stand between the two men. She gave Clement an arch look. "Miko here's been dyin' to meet you, Roy," said Rice. "She's a . . . how'd you put it, babe?"

"Pal-ty animal," said Miko, and inhaled for Clement.

Clement said, "Shit," laughed, and draped an arm around Miko. He lifted his glass to Rice, who joined him in the toast.

"To good company," said Rice, placing strong emphasis on the word *company*. Their eyes engaged over the rims of their glasses. It felt like a moment of bonding, a moment during which assurances were offered and confirmations exchanged. But Clement wasn't fool enough to trust it.

At twenty-nine, with light brown hair falling to the middle of her back, Lily still looked like a college girl. Willow, long-limbed, the marks of age — faint lines bracketing her mouth, the hint of crow's-feet — barely sketched in. Her face was lean, finely boned, a bit horsey, and her features had an assertive refinement that Clement associated with East Hampton and West Palm Beach; she was beautiful, but one noticed that only after noticing her aura of health and style, as if beauty were merely an accessory that she displayed whenever she wished to show to advantage. Moving about the hotel room, preparing for bed, her gestures were eloquent and precise, and this, too, was a quality that Clement associated with the milieu of polo matches and expensive claret, with lives that had the clarity of sparkling water. In the beginning, her elegance had made him painfully aware of the commonality of his own roots, and this had caused him to view her as an acquisition, something he had obtained by nefarious means; sooner or later, he'd believed, she would see through to his essential crudity and leave him. But four years of marriage had erased most of those feelings, and despite his infidelity with Miko — a tactical infidelity to ratify the masculine contract he had made with Rice — he loved her. And more important, he trusted her.

Trust, to Clement's mind, was better than love, a thing of far greater rarity and consequence. He had trusted only one other person in his life —

Robert D'allessandro — and he realized that the strain of emotion he'd felt for D'allessandro was akin to what he felt for Lily. In each instance he had surrendered himself not like a lover, but like a child, sensing that the object of his affections was more competent than he in a sphere of existence to which he could only aspire, an altitude of feeling denied him by the abuses of an orphaned childhood. He had permitted D'allessandro to steer him through this unfamiliar medium, and after the old man had died, he had been lost until Lily had come along and reoriented him. She had been doing graduate work in economics and had interviewed him in regard to the financial resurgence of Calcutta, a matter of sensitivity to Clement, since it had been instrumental in stalling his career. He'd had her investigated, and during the course of the investigation, he had become fascinated by her. With her Vassar education and aristocratic bloodlines, she had seemed alien, unfathomable, and it had taken him a long time to accept that she could sympathize with his work. But the upshot had been that she had renewed his enthusiasm for the Company by imbuing him with a sense of his own worth. And that had been the beginning of trust.

She dimmed the lights and slipped into bed, turning to face him, her breasts flattening against his chest. He grew hard against her belly, and he started to pull away, knowing that she was worn-out from her day in the market; but she hooked her fingers into his back and kept him close.

"Thought you were too tired," he said.

She kissed his chest. "I just want you inside me a minute." She rested a knee on his hip, letting him slip between her legs.

"A minute, huh?"

"Maybe two."

Her breath quickened, warming his cheek, and when he entered her, she tensed until he had gone deep.

"God," she said. "God, you feel good in me."

He fucked her heavily, watching her face grow slack, slivers of white showing beneath her eyelids. After a few seconds he stopped, content to hold her and touch her breasts. The knowledge that he was possessing a rich man's woman, having her in a rich man's hotel, with its cool sheets and androgynous luxury . . . this never failed to give him venal satisfaction.

"I want you to finish," she said, her eyes still closed.

"You're falling asleep."

"It's nice . . . falling asleep like that." She ran a hand along his arm.

"Roy?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you want to see that woman?"

"The one in Mustang? I just want to find out what it was like to be a goddess."

"Oh." She sounded distressed.

"What's the matter?"

"I was hoping it was business. I wouldn't be jealous of business."

"You've got no reason to be jealous."

She opened her eyes; in the half-light they were small puzzles of gleam and shadow. "Maybe not."

"Definitely not."

"I don't know. You're always looking for something else . . . like with D'allessandro. You say he's dead, and still you keep looking for him."

"That's not real," he said. "I know he's dead, but I just keep hoping that somebody'll beat the game. It's got nothing to do with us."

"Yes, it does. It's like saying I'm not enough." She twisted her head away, stared at the ceiling. "Christ, that sounds stupid!"

Clement was losing his erection, and, wanting to maintain intimacy, he pulled her hard against him. "Would you like me to cancel the trip?"

"Of course I would. You're going to see a goddess."

"An ex-goddess. She probably looks like a yak."

"It isn't just that I'm jealous," she said after a bit. "All this with D'allessandro, and now with Kumari, it's covering up something else. You've got a problem, and you're using this to avoid dealing with it. That's not like you."

He slipped out of her, and she gasped, tried to guide him back in.

"I've kinda lost the mood," he said.

"Are you angry?"

"Nah. I'm a little screwed-up right now is all." He flopped onto his back. He wanted to be open with her, but openness seemed arduous, a chore demanding too much energy. "I need a couple of days to sort things out. When I get back, we'll talk about it . . . all right?"

"All right," she said, disappointment in her voice. She settled against him, her head tucked into the join of his neck and shoulder, an arm flung

across his chest. Her breathing soon became deep and regular.

Clement felt he had passed some crisis, and realized that although he had been giving evasive answers to Lily's questions, he had believed every word he'd said. That was SOP, lying to oneself. It had taken him awhile to understand that the name The Company referred as much to an acting company as to a business concern. Agents had to be accomplished actors. They went from role to role, less interpreting than inhabiting them, and by doing so they lost track of their identities. But that was a survival trait. If you had no solid identity, you could shrug off morality with the same ease that you removed a costume, and that immunized you to an extent against pain. Clement's problem was that he had begun to remember who he was, and he blamed Robert D'allessandro for this.

He recalled sitting with D'allessandro and watching the old man — as slow and ponderous as a gray bear — carve his toy animals, his form of stress therapy, and talking about how he wished he could get away and live up in the hills. Malaysia, maybe. Thailand. On one occasion he had laughed and said, "Y'know, Roy, I used to want to own a goddamn country, and now all I want is to sit somewhere peaceful and learn how to get these bastards right." He'd held up a half-finished tiger, regarding it sourly. "Damn things always turn out looking like striped dogs."

It occurred to Clement that D'allessandro had carved him into shape just as he had his wooden animals, and that he had done as clumsy a job on him as he had with the tigers. He had taken a rough chunk of human material and created a new man, one with a conscience and the capacity for love, and so had rendered him totally unfit for his job. What Rice had said, that he was becoming an eccentric . . . no doubt about it. Lately he had been screwing up everything, and he didn't care. It was as if he had admitted his sins, and by that admission had lost the ability to endure them. And maybe Lily had been right, too. Maybe in searching for D'allessandro, for Kumari, he was really searching for an alternative to supplant every facet of his life.

He tried to answer Lily's question about why he wanted to see Cheni Abdurachan; but instead he began to assemble a portrait of her, giving her a slim body and large eyes and black hair braided into a pigtail, seeing her as neither beautiful nor ugly, but passable, with delicate Newar features obscured beneath a mask of grime. Once he had finished, she hovered at the center of a diffuse golden light, an island of Buddhist glow, and

appeared to be staring directly into his eyes. He had the impression that she was afraid, that although she possessed a core of strength, she was losing a battle against some menacing force. His sense of her grew more specific, so intense and individual that he became unnerved and the image flew apart. He lay blinking, confused. Everything — the shadowed drapes, the dim reflection in the mirror, even Lily — seemed ghostly by comparison to his apprehension of Cheni. This was more than eccentricity, he thought; he was slipping badly. He'd given lip service to the idea of sorting things out, but that might be exactly what he should do. Take a trip and try to get a grip on his life. He almost laughed out loud. *His* life. Life had never been his. From orphanage to army to CIA, he had always been part of some bureaucratic nightmare.

Lily stirred, her arm tightening about his chest. "You say something?" "Un-uh." He stroked her hair. "Go back to sleep."

She was silent a few seconds, and then said, "I'm scared, Roy. I know something's going on with you, and it scares me."

He started to reassure her, but didn't think he could be convincing. He felt very fragile in his head, very shaky. If there were one problem, one wall against which to hurl himself, he might be able to pull it together. But everything was becoming a problem now, and he had no idea what to do.

AN HOUR from Tasang-partsi. The air was bitter cold, unbelievably clear, the dark blue of the sky overhead shading down toward the horizon on every side to a band of pale turquoise. Miles to the east, the crevices of glaciers on the slopes of a snowy peak looked as defined as the folds of the dun-colored rock above him. He was negotiating a trail along the flank of a hill; below, at the base of the cliff, a thin torrent of silvery water coursed down the center of a wide gravel bed and flowed off into a cut between the hills. Stunted thistles and gray bushes of wormwood sprouted alongside the trail; ahead lay pinnacles of reddish rock, their eastern faces shadowed to purple. D'allessandro would have loved this country, Clement thought. Clean and empty, yet with a feel of spiritual fecundity. Maybe he would have learned how to carve a tiger by now.

Clement had been twenty-eight when he had been assigned to D'allessandro, who was living then in Costa Rica, unable to leave for fear of

being extradited on charges of fraud and extortion; however, D'allessandro had devised a plan that had engaged the favorable attention of the CIA. It was at heart altruistic, though he hid that fact from almost everyone; but eventually it became apparent that he wanted to leave a legacy, something to absolve his sins. The plan took seven years to implement, and incorporated — among other elements — a bogus breakthrough in cinematic technology, an effective synthetic cocaine, a string of gambling resorts built in the Maldives and along the Malabar Coast, and, most important, a foundation whose purpose was to create low-cost housing outside Calcutta and stimulate the economy of the city. The foundation, fronted by respectable Hindu businessmen who had no idea of the skulduggery taking place around them, served as the holding company for the various properties; the foundation's accounts, seeded by a sizable investment of CIA funds, were swollen by investments in the billions solicited from every major criminal organization in the world. The CIA believed they were pulling off the greatest sting in history, an operation that would throw the criminal world into chaos and increase American influence on the subcontinent by 1,000 percent. The criminal organizations had been led to believe that they would wind up in control of the world's entertainment industry, that their own political influence would increase. The plan was a masterpiece of misdirection, a work of genius that depended on dozens of lesser plans and ruthless covert maneuvers, most engineered by Clement, whom D'allessandro had at last taken into his confidence and to whom he had revealed the ultimate misdirection — that at some point a series of traps would be sprung, and the foundation's funds would be channeled into several U.N. agencies, who were ready with schemes for their charitable disposition.

D'allessandro's recruitment of Clement to be his accomplice had been a beautifully managed seduction. He'd played upon Clement's orphaned childhood in Wyoming and an attendant sympathy for the disenfranchised, and had made himself into a father figure. Clement had genuinely loved the old man, and D'allessandro, he believed, had loved him; he had certainly taken pains to make sure that Clement had not been implicated. As he scrambled up a rise, it seemed for the first time that he could feel how large a space the old man had filled in his life; he had been father, brother, friend . . . and creator. By contrast, the space filled by Lily, that of lover, was small indeed. Thinking this hurt Clement, and because he was

no longer a competent actor, he was unable to disregard his feelings, but forced himself to walk faster and faster, until the aching of his muscles overwhelmed thought.

It was late afternoon by the time he reached Tasang-partsi. Ridges of leaden cloud marbled with tin-colored glare hung over the hills; the wind blew in fitful gusts, whirling up pale grit that appeared to sparkle as it vanished. The village consisted of about thirty black sod houses with slate roofs sheltering against a cliff; a hill rose from the summit of the cliff, resembling more a pile of granitic rubble than an actual geologic formation. The river had narrowed to a fouled stream, and a couple of yaks with paper flowers tied to their horns were drinking from it. The street paralleled the stream and was of frozen mud, deeply rutted; protruding from a glaze of cracked yellowish ice at its center was the decaying body of a dog, adding to the fearsome stink. Two ravens perched atop it looked like bizarre ornaments until they spread their wings and flapped away. Garbage and offal had been banked against the walls of the houses to the level of the first-floor windows, which were framed by uneven matchboarding; holes had been chopped in the filth to permit access to the doors. The squalor was appalling, yet was so absolute that it had a kind of morbid grandeur, like a village on the edge of some doomed mythical kingdom.

A young boy guided Clement to a house at the west end of the village, and he stood staring at the door — three blackened planks and a huge brass padlock, looking at once simple and complex, like a child's puzzle. He knocked, feeling foolish at having come all this way on a whim. The instant before the door opened, he recalled the portrait he'd created of Cheni Abdurachan back in Katmandu, of a slim woman with doe eyes and a pigtail, and when she appeared in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, she was so like his portrait that he was stunned. She was prettier than he'd imagined, and less dirty, her skin bronzed by a layer of soot; but still, the resemblance was amazing.

"Are you from the university?" she asked wearily, lowering her head and pinching the bridge of her nose.

He could tell that unless he came up with a good excuse, he wasn't going to have much time with her. "My name's Roy Clement. I had a . . . dream, a hallucination. I saw your face. I pictured you just like you are now, and I thought it was important to see you."

She gave him a searching look. "You think you're lying, don't you?"

"You're telling the truth and don't know it." She stepped aside to let him pass, and laughed; the laughter had a distressed, irrational sound.

The front room of the house was choked with bluish haze that seeped from a stone oven, and was poorly lit by butter lamps — brass bowls with floating wicks — resting on a table at the back. A wooden trapdoor was inset into the ceiling. Every surface was covered with a sooty residue, even the brass cooking utensils hung on pegs above the oven. The tips of cattle bones and horns used to strengthen the construction stuck out from the walls. Clement took a chair at the table, thinking that it might have been a room in some medieval hovel. Cheni took a wheel of bread from the oven, placed it on the table, and handed Clement a knife. The bread was hot and crusty, but the smell of burning yak dung from the fire beneath the oven was so strong, it ruined the taste.

"You want to learn about Kumari," Cheni said, dropping into the chair opposite him.

That startled him for a moment, but then he said, "I suppose everybody asks you about her."

Again that disturbing laugh; it had the rhythm of a fading echo and conveyed no feeling of amusement. "Not at all," she said. "Anthropologists come here and ask what I ate in the temple and who instructed me. They're not interested in Kumari."

"Then how. . . ."

"I know a lot about you," she said. "I know who you are."

He scoffed at that.

"You're a violent man," she said. "You've never had any qualms about it until lately. Now you've developed qualms, and you're in a position where they're a liability. But that's not your biggest problem." She planted her hands palm-down on the table, glanced back and forth between them as if gauging their relative size. "Your biggest problem is that you haven't changed enough. It's as if you've been half-formed. Violence is ingrained in you, and you can't exorcise it. And now you've been led here . . . but not to learn about Kumari. I can't help you much with that, anyway. I woke up one day and discovered I was twelve years old, a little girl being led out of the temple. Before that my memories are vague. Voices and golden rooms. Fighting . . . I remember always fighting. Kumari seemed dark to me, though there was a light at her heart. Not evil, but dark by necessity, dark because she dealt with darkness. But the only thing I'm sure of about

her is that she was with me for a while."

Everything she'd told him about himself was threatening and seemed undeniable, yet he felt compelled to deny at least part of it. "I wasn't led here," he said defiantly. "I'm just taking a few days off."

She shrugged.

He'd expected her to argue, and when she did not, he was at a loss for words. He watched her plucking at a splinter; she was, he realized, always in motion, fidgeting, picking at something. "Am I making you uncomfortable?" he asked.

"No more than most people."

"Is there anything you want me to do? I'm sorry if I've offended you."

She shook her head wildly as if shaking bees from her hair. "I can't talk to you. . . . You won't accept my answers."

"I'll try to," he said, taken aback by her behavior.

"All right." She nodded, a twitch as much as an affirmation, and when she spoke again, she bit off each word as if she were restraining herself from a more forceful expression. "I'm uncomfortable around people because I'm unlucky for them. Very unlucky. I'm not talking about the kind of luck that brings a bad run at cards or a streak of unfortunate household accidents. There's death in me. You may have trouble believing that, but there's no real argument between how you think and how I do. I say you were led here; you claim it's coincidence. I tell you I'm unlucky, and you might say that's merely fate or the way the world works. What you view as ordinary seems magical for me. Where I see gods or devils, you may see the actions of logical consequence. For me the world is a vast spell, for you an intricate coincidence. There's scarcely any distance between those poles. So when I tell you something, don't belittle it. If you have to justify it in logical terms, that's fine. But you have to accept it, or else we can't talk."

"I understand."

She leaned back, her hands at rest on the tabletop, and this sudden transition from tension to calm, more than any of the other signs, made it clear that she was fighting for control, that she was farther along the same path of madness down which he had been slipping. And, he recalled, that had been part of his original vision of her, though back in Katmandu he had assumed that she was struggling against some external force. Maybe he *had* been led here, he thought. Maybe her knowledge of him was no

more explicable than his knowledge of her, no less real.

"That's better," she said, and gave another of her unsettling laughs.

"Do you know what I'm thinking?" he asked.

"It's a matter of seeing," she said. "You either see things or you don't. Perhaps that's why you're here . . . to learn to see."

The generality of the response annoyed him, but rather than press her, he tried a different tack. "Why do you live here?" he asked. "There can't be anything to interest you."

"It's an unlucky place, so it suits me. And I have a great deal to do. I walk; I read. And I practice *chod*."

"Is that a religion?"

"It's a ritual of Tibetan Buddhism. A test of the soul against the demons."

"You fight the demons?"

"I confront them. There is no point in fighting. They always win."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Kumari," she said. "Maybe it's got something to do with her. Ever since she left, I've been drawn to *chod* . . . to the demons. Or maybe it had to do with. . . ."

"With what?"

She had a withdrawn look. "There was a part of Kumari that I never understood. It seemed . . . I don't know. Different. Not really part of the goddess, and yet joined to her. Her ally against the dark. Her . . . her shield."

"Why would a goddess need help?"

"The demons," said Cheni. "Not even Kumari can stand alone against them." She waved her hand as if to wipe out what she had said. "It's as I told you. . . . I can't really remember."

From the corner, she took a pole with a rope loop at one end and pushed up the trapdoor in the ceiling. Where the door had been was now a square of rich, deep blue and stars and a half-moon. Silence seemed to pour into the room, along with the chill air. Laughter came from a nearby house, sounding unnaturally bright. From somewhere high above, a shrill voice chanting. Cheni explained that the voice belonged to a hermit, a crazy man who inhabited a ruin on the hilltop. Her tone was disapproving, and he asked why this was.

"The villagers think he's a shaman. And the children all love him. . . ."

They call him 'uncle.' But he's just crazy."

"Maybe he's a children's shaman."

Cheni sniffed. "He's afraid of everyone. He won't say a word to anybody. Sometimes he helps me out, but mostly he just hides in the ruins."

"He sounds harmless."

She sniffed. "Is that an American virtue . . . harmlessness?"

Ragged blue clouds began passing across the moon, and, gazing up at them, Clement remembered having a similar sense of isolation during his childhood, nights when he had run away from the orphanage and hidden in culverts, in woods. It suddenly seemed very strange that he could have come this far from those empty nights, that he had lived and fought and killed and wound up in Mustang with a woman who had once been the goddess Kumari. Thinking this made him feel vulnerable, open to unseen eyes, as frail as the moonlight, and he suspected that clouds might be edging close to the light that shined him into being. He turned his gaze to Cheni. She was staring at him, aghast; she pushed back the chair and came to her feet.

"What is it?" he asked.

She felt behind her, groping for the door to the bedroom. "Don't come near me!" she said. "Do you understand? I see you now! Stay away from me!" She darted into the bedroom and closed the door. Clement heard the latch click.

"Hey!" he shouted. "What's wrong? What'd I do?"

No response.

He got up and walked to the door. "Hey, are you all right?" When she didn't answer, he said, "Is it O.K. if I sleep out here?"

Nothing.

"Fuck!" He dropped back into the chair. The chanting from the hill began to annoy him; he reached for the pole and closed the trapdoor. He sat awhile, nourished by the silence, yet unsure whether to go or stay. He glanced around the room. His eyes seemed to catch on the bones sticking out of the wall, and he imagined himself to be a crazy little man sitting in a barbarous black house with teeth poking from the walls, a miniature set on a dusty shelf out of sight behind toy mountains. It pleased him to think of himself as inconsequential, as being lost and small, and he decided that he would stay. Cheni, he believed, would come around. Despite her obvious mental problems, he sensed an unalloyed place inside her that

madness had not touched, where her being was intact, as if madness was not central to her, but rather a kind of infection corrupting her from the outside in. Her problems were much like his, he thought, in that they had apparently been brought about by a powerful outside influence. By Kumari, perhaps. This persuaded him to conclude what he had been tempted to conclude ever since meeting her — that there was some innate bond between them, some basic compatibility — and he imagined lying down with her amid the stench of burning yak dung, of becoming one with her unluckiness and engaging a cosmic doom.

At length, figuring that he had no choice but to stay, he snuffed out the butter lamp and spread his sleeping bag on the floor; he took out his automatic, wormed into the bag, and zipped it shut. Darkness shut down around him. He lay there alert, unable to fall asleep. Every few minutes, he checked his watch, worried about insomnia. After almost an hour, he heard a keening sound and thought, because of its complex modulation, it must be an animal voicing pain or loneliness; but when the cry came again, he realized it was only the voice of the land in its emptiness, the white violin whisper of the wind moving through the passes. He listened to it sounding over and over, hypnotized by its eerie music, and came to feel that he, too, was being drawn thin and fine and pure, a cold song drifting into silence.

He dreamed of murders, but the murders were not dreams, though they had the artful lucidity of something imagined. He dreamed of knives, the feeling of knives, the tremor that preceded the rush of blood; and he dreamed of explosive truth, of tiny figures blowing up into heaven; and he dreamed of the incisive meaning of hollow-points, of breast pockets centered by cross hairs; and of an old Hindu man, riddled with cancer, strapping a bomb to his waist, shaking his hand, thanking him for the benefits paid to his family . . . and that woke him. At first he thought that the sight of Cheni going through the front door was part of the dream, but when he realized it had been real, he scrambled up, gun in hand, and pulled on his jacket and went out into the street, confused and heavy with sleep, yet curious about what she could be doing so late. He followed her along a trail that ascended the cliffside and wound around the hill atop it. The moon was still high, the stars thick, and he thought of other nights spent tracking a target; from those nights he appropriated a feeling of icy

competence and calculation that dissipated the residue of his dreams and turned his pursuit into a logistical game. On several occasions he had the notion that he was being followed, but he chalked this up to an overactive imagination. At the summit of the hill, barely distinguishable from the pitch of stones beneath it, a jumbled patchwork of shadows and grays, stood a large ruin of some sort, and it was toward the ruin that Cheni was making her way. The ascent was rough going. Clement had to proceed along rocky defiles and up steep faces, and by the time he reached the base of the walls, he was winded. He sat down to catch his breath and had a look around.

The walls were about thirty feet high, crumbled away in sections, and the gate consisted of two huge wooden doors hanging askew, many of their planks shattered as if by some external force. Flat mani stones with prayers graven in Tibetan script were propped beside the gate, and, judging by their presence, Clement assumed the place to be a monastery. He remained sitting for a good while, coming to appreciate the hushed atmosphere, the imposing blankness of the walls, the resounding emptiness, the edged appliques of shadow, and he began to feel akin to this irrational heap of stones, to the fundamental denials of hope and joy at its heart, with its echoes of animism and droning chants, old insect gods brought low to buzz among the haze of butter lamps and the fumes of ghastly revelation rising from the machineries of prayer. He laughed, alight with his own irrationality, his mind firing on all circuits as with the first rush of a cocaine high, and, still chuckling, he dusted himself off and went inside the ruin.

He crossed a courtyard toward a massive building of grayish white limestone, windowless, resembling a small nuclear facility. Strung above the entrance were a number of tattered prayer flags: pale blue pennons inscribed with spidery characters that snapped and lashed in the wind. He climbed a flight of steps and entered a wide corridor lined with small musty cells. The moonlight penetrated a short way into the corridor, illuminating faded frescoes that depicted flayed bodies, skulls filled with blood, heaps of entrails, and demons standing among them — squat, muscular, with fanged mouths and clawed hands and glaring, round eyes. They had a cartoonish aspect, reminding Clement of creatures created to represent tooth decay or bad breath. He was intrigued by them, and, as he inspected the frescoes, he had the impression that they were staring out

over their terrestrial kingdom, and he was at the forefront of a vast throng, whose individual natures became evident to him, for he seemed to see them all reflected in the demon's eyes, an intricate conceit of contorted limbs and twisted sinews and demented faces that were joined to form a dark and forbidding forest, with tears and droplets of blood glistening among them like gemmy fruit, the whole mass seething in torment as with a constant flow of wind; and beetles were feasting on the eyes of these damned; and women were tearing each other's hair; and other women mated with serpents; and men with hideous cancers that had half-consumed their faces were clawing at their own flesh, trying to dig out some vital organ that would end their suffering; and here a fat man was feeding upon gobbets of his own flesh; and here an addict injecting fire into his genitals; and behind this host of humanity were the legions of the netherworld, hunchbacks whose humps had spindly arms and bony hands that groped the air for purchase, and flies with human mouths, and creatures such as griffins and chimeras and basilisks in whose eyes registered the enigmatic record of entropic decay; and they were crowding forward, forcing mankind toward their doom, toward the terrible negative fates rendered on the wall of the abandoned monastery — and Clement tried to claw his way back from the brink, drawing moans from those whom he shoved aside and. . . He pushed away from the wall, trembling, sweaty, realizing that not only had he been in the process of losing it, but that the moaning was real, coming from farther along the corridor. Still unsteady, he switched off the safety of the automatic, held it barrel-up beside his jaw, and eased along the wall, seeing tag ends of his vision floating on the darkness. As he reached a corner, the moan sounded again, louder, clearly a woman's voice. He peered down the cross corridor, and at the far end he spotted a vertical seam of moonlight. He headed toward it, moving quickly. The way was blocked by a curtain of yak hair. He twitched the curtain aside with his pistol barrel. Directly opposite, some twenty yards away across an expanse of broken flagstones, was a doorway flanked by two columns; Cheni was spread-eagled between the columns, her arms and legs secured by ropes. She had sagged, her head hanging down, face veiled by the dark shawl of her hair. Clement assumed she was unconscious, but then she lifted her head and stared through the strands of her hair at a point above him.

His instincts were to go to her, but it was such an unexpected and

strange development that he held back, imagining a treacherous scenario. It was the perfect setup for an assassin. He remembered his feeling of being followed, and wondered if Rice's warning back in Katmandu had not been merely a general caution, if he'd been hinting that some definite action was being contemplated. Clement opened the curtain a few inches wider to get a view of the rest of the courtyard. It was a long notch between buildings, closed in by the monastery's outer walls, a stage of bone-white and black shadow, and, aside from Cheni, it was deserted. Dark stems of dead nettles poking from cracks. Clement glanced back along the corridor, but could detect no sign of movement; he turned again to the courtyard and saw that Cheni had slumped, her head lolling drunkenly. He was, he decided, being overly paranoid. There had been a hundred opportunities to take him since he'd left Katmandu, and he could see no reason to explain why they would want to involve Cheni.

He stepped out into the courtyard, crossing toward her, wondering who could have done this, keeping his pistol trained on the darkness at her back. Before he had gone halfway, she began to struggle against her ropes, and — her eyes rolling up to the strip of starry sky between the buildings — she let out a throat-tearing scream. Clement turned his own eyes to the sky. Part of Orion was visible. A thin cloud passing from the south. Then an almost imperceptible rippling, like heat haze. But it disappeared in a matter of seconds. Some form of condensation, he thought.

"Take it easy," he said to Cheni, who was thrashing about, spitting out phrases in Newar. He had the idea that her struggles were not fearful, but were bent toward getting at something, and that her scream, too, had been enraged. He reached for the knot that secured her right arm, and the second his fingers touched it, he was overwhelmed by a sensation of dizziness. He sank to his knees, shaking his head to clear it. He glanced up and had the impression of something huge and indistinct towering fifteen or twenty feet above, a disturbance in the air that gradually assumed a coherent shape. The image of a demon resembling those on the monastery walls. Colorless, a mere outline, as if, like the murals, it had faded with time and hard weather. Thick-legged and barrel-chested. Its talons tipped with moonlight; a fleshy tongue caged by hooked fangs. Its silence was terrifying, and Clement wanted to run, but his weakness prevailed. He fell back, striking his head against the base of the column. His heart felt huge and hot, impacting his chest, and he was choking with fear. The demon's

The bullet impacted with a splash of gold at the center of the demon's chest.

form began to solidify, to acquire traces of color and detail, and, lifting his gun hand — a tremendous effort, because the pull of gravity seemed to have increased — Clement fired at the thing.

Firing had been an act of desperation, and he had not expected it to have an effect, believing that the demon was either a hallucination or else it would be immune to earthly deterrents. But there was an effect . . . though it was not one he would have cared to elicit. The bullet traced a fiery line through the dusky light, impacting with a splash of vivid gold at the center of the demon's chest; from the edges of the splash, an inky darkness began to spread with the sluggishness of oil throughout the demon's form, until it appeared that a hole had been punched through into interstellar space, a hole that had roughly a human shape and was figured by a single golden star. It looked to be inset into the air, to open onto a great depth, and it had for Clement the chill allure of a gorge that had suddenly opened beneath his feet. He scrambled back from it, clawing at the broken flagstones; but the blackness bulged toward him like a membrane burst, and the undamned blackness flowed forth and swept over him.

As he fell — and it was a fall, slow yet out of control, pinwheeling down and down — he understood that he was passing along the tunnel that the bullet was forging through the demon's flesh; he could see the bullet ahead of him — a golden dot maintaining its distance. He was terribly cold, and an aching emptiness was gradually filling him the way that darkness had filled the demon. He cried out, but the cry offered no release. It seemed, rather, a spewing forth of the petty details of his life, as if life itself were no more than a cry. All his essential things, every violence, every affection, were — he realized — varieties of emptiness, emblems of the horrid vacuum through which he had been falling for thirty-eight years. He touched and tasted each one, and was harrowed by their vacancy. He wanted to hide from the knowledge of what they were, what he was, but that proved impossible. The golden light of the bullet was dwindling, and he saw that soon he would be trapped inside the demon, that his own hellish emptiness would become the bars of his prison. He

twisted about, hoping to straighten his fall, to move toward the light, but made no progress. Even if he could escape, he thought, what purpose would it serve? Emptiness and failure were everywhere, and the particulars of his life were demons in themselves. He had no choice except to face them.

Reaching that accord, accepting it, acted to calm him, and when he tried again to straighten his fall, this time he succeeded. The cold began to recede, and the darkness was thickening, providing a resistance that further slowed his fall, and he discovered that he could use that resistance to pull himself along. The golden light acquired a gravity that drew him faster and faster; it became a diffuse golden circle, radiant like a sun, toward which the darkness was funneling him, and soon, with the barest sense of a transition, he found himself at its center, lying on a pallet, staring at a butter lamp set into a niche carved into a black wall . . . a wall from which the tips of cattle horns protruded.

Cheni was kneeling beside him, and he realized that he was in her bedroom. He struggled to sit up, befuddled, unable to accept that he was safe, but was overcome by weakness; he lay back, watching her face hovering close as she adjusted the pillow beneath his head. Like, he thought, the face of a *gopi* girl, one of those women who danced and played the flute for Krishna. Almost a parody of femininity, all of its features too sensuous by a degree. He felt drawn to her, attracted in much the same way that he had been attracted by the demon and then by the golden light, a physical compulsion, and he shifted his right hand so that it pressed against her leg. She tensed, but didn't move away.

"What happened up there?" he asked.

"What do you think happened?"

"I'm not sure," he said; then, after a pause: "You were tied up."

"*Chod*," she said.

"That's *chod*? You tie yourself up?"

"The hermit helps me with the ropes. He helped carry you down, too." She glanced behind her. "He gave me something for you. I must have left it in the other room."

"I don't get why you have to tie yourself up."

"You saw the demon?"

"I saw something."

"Demons thrive on fear. To practice *chod*, you must put yourself in

a position that forces you to confront them. If you have nowhere to run, you have to make a stand."

He moved his hand along her thigh; the contact warmed him.

"Do you understand what I said?" she asked.

"Uh-huh." He turned on his side, facing her, and put his other hand on her hip. He waited for her to resist, and when she did not, he pulled her down beside him. Her face was stoic, hard to read. He touched her breasts, let the soft weight of one settle in his palm; her eyelids drooped. "There's something I can't figure out."

"Yes?"

"Last night you locked yourself away from me. You talked about being unlucky. And now you. . . ."

"I saw that we might be lovers," she said. "I needed a lover, but I was afraid for you. Then, at the monastery, you were very courageous. It wasn't necessary, but nonetheless you were courageous."

"So this is my reward?"

"It is no reward," she said. "I know why you're here. I saw it at the monastery."

The light from the butter lamp seemed to be melting over them, thickening into an atmosphere of heat and languor, and Clement tugged down the zipper of her jeans, worked his hand beneath the stiff fabric, his fingertips pushing into silky hair. She arched against the pressure of his hand and made a faint scratchy noise in the back of her throat. Despite the arousal, he felt odd at touching her so intimately. It was as if their sexuality was purely genital, as if their closeness were unemotional, a kind of intricate fitting together, satisfying in the sense that solving a puzzle was satisfying.

"Why *am* I here?" he asked, wrangling her jeans past her hips.

"You were led here by Kumari," she whispered, and helped him with his own clothing.

"I don't understand."

"Kumari," she said, and then repeated the name several times, her tone becoming frantic, the rhythm of her words matching the clumsy movements they made in shedding their clothes; it seemed her inability to explain was unsettling her.

"It's all right," he said. "It's all right."

Her eyes blinked open. "You're going to know Kumari, know her

light. Luck doesn't matter for you anymore."

He pushed her onto her back, propped himself above her, and thought how fine it was that a kid from a Wyoming orphanage was going to fuck a goddess. "It never did," he said.

As he entered her, he imagined himself engaging bad luck, terrible luck, and something cold trickled along his spine; yet even the thought of death was arousing now, inspiring, enlisting his adventurousness, and for a few moments it was good with her. But although clinically fulfilling, their lovemaking never matched his expectations. It remained clumsy, tentative, curiously uninvolved, and afterward he felt that he had taken advantage of a sick woman and was ashamed. He left her sleeping, then dressed and went into the front room. It seemed that all his emotion and tumult had come to no result, and he needed a result; he believed he had been promised a result by the place and the woman and his desire for some sort of resolution. Maybe, he thought, he should save them both embarrassment and get out while she was still asleep. But he couldn't think where to go.

He sat down, resting an elbow on the table, cupping his chin. His elbow nudged something, and he cocked an eye toward it. At first he could hardly believe what he was seeing, and even when he picked the thing up, he kept expecting it to vanish, to be another hallucination. But it was solid, real, a perfectly carved wooden tiger. Painted orange and black, with a red mouth and white fangs and eyes of vivid green. Flawless. A feral talisman. The hermit, he thought, remembering what Cheni had said about the man giving him a gift. D'allessandro was up there, up in the monastery. He felt so much, he couldn't put a name to any of his emotions. He got to his feet, clutching the wooden tiger, and paced back and forth, wondering if it could be a trap. If D'allessandro was up there, why would he make his presence known? He'd be afraid . . . even of Clement. And that was the answer. He'd figure that Clement was going to find him sooner or later, and he would want to arrange a meeting on his own terms. He wouldn't have wanted to kill Clement in front of Cheni, and he couldn't have killed Cheni without arousing the suspicion of the villagers. This way, however, he could discover how much was known about his whereabouts. And he'd give Clement a chance to prove himself — Clement was sure of that. Exhilarated, he looked around for his coat and spotted it crumpled in a corner. He grabbed it, and his automatic fell from the

pocket. He scooped it up. The gun reminded him of what had happened the night before, and he had second thoughts about returning. But then he realized that it had been Cheni who had brought the demon — if there had really been a demon — and that if D'allessandro could live in the place, he would be all right. He shrugged into his coat, tucked the gun into his belt at the small of his back, and stepped out into the street. The sun was high, shining whitely through fraying clouds. He set out walking briskly, enlivened by the cold, thin air and the prospect of seeing D'allessandro.

Bad luck, my ass! he said to himself.

By day, the interior courtyard where Cheni had been tied up seemed more abandoned and ruinous than it had by night. Wind whirled up dust from the flagstones, and the outer wall showed itself to be deeply pocked, with fist-sized chunks of rock and mortar lying at its base; the clouds had moved on, and between the two buildings, the strip of sky was a bright burning blue. Clement called out to D'allessandro, and the name stirred a little something in the shadows. He shivered, took out the wooden tiger, and examined it again. Plush red jewel box of a mouth, and painted muscles flowing. The cunning white teeth were absolutes. He closed his fist around it, feeling anger and love and frustration.

"It's me," he shouted. "It's Roy."

A snick, a small solidity among the whisperings of the wind.

He squeezed the tiger more tightly; its pointed ears pricked his palm.

"D'allessandro!"

He had a sense of presence nearby, and he laughed, a broken laughter that trailed away and left him empty. A bird, visible as a black incision in the pure sky, soared overhead, and the sight caught at Clement, filling him with emotion. He walked out into the courtyard, out of the shadows and into the glittering silence.

"C'mon, D'allessandro!" he said. "I don't want to hurt you!"

He listened, but heard only the wind. He stood straight, hands clasped behind his back, and faced the curtain of yak hair covering the doorway from which he had come.

"Know what I can't figure out? Why you didn't convince me you were dead. You could convince people of anything. You were a fucking genius at that. It's like you wanted me to know that you were alive . . . Isn't that right?"

Nothing.

"Well," he said, "if you're not going to come out, I'll just talk, O.K.?" He let out a breath, and that weakened him, opened him to more emotion. "Remember everything I did for you? All the killings, all the bloody detail work. I hated it, but I had to do it. Because I really appreciated what you'd done for me, y'know. Really. I wouldn't know shit if it weren't for you. And even when all the shit I know is screwing me up, I'm still very appreciative." He scuffed his heel against the stones. "I guess that might sound a little . . . uh . . . a little confused. I know that. What can I tell you? I probably am a little confused. But that's how you gotta be if you want to keep the assholes off-balance, right? You taught me that, too." The silence was eroding his self-control; the sun seemed to be making a fuming noise. "What is this crap? If you're paranoid, man, do what you gotta! Otherwise, get your ass out here!"

A scraping sound, then a thick baritone saying, "Put your hands on top of your head, Roy."

Clement, his heart racing, did as ordered.

A massive figure in a maroon robe pushed through the curtain of yak hair. Jowly, sad face dyed to a deep mahogany. Filthy gray hair twisted into strands that fell to his shoulders. Wearing sandals and carrying an Uzi. Six years had worn new lines in the face, but Clement would have known it under any circumstance, no matter how effective the disguise. He felt eager and nervous, like a child hoping for approval, and he couldn't think of what to say. D'allessandro's dark eyes, set amid folds and pouches of skin, were narrowed, fixed on him, and Clement shifted uncomfortably.

"You look like a fucking gypsy," he said at last, and laughed.

His expression solemn, D'allessandro came down the steps, keeping the Uzi trained on Clement. "What am I going to do with you, Roy?"

"Do with me? Nothing." He held up the tiger. "Finally got 'em right, huh?"

D'allessandro ignored the question. "Are you alone?"

"Yeah. I . . ."

"What brought you to the village?"

This was not going as Clement had anticipated. He had thought that emotion would overwhelm suspicion; he had expected that D'allessandro would have grown simple and beatific like Gepetto, reduced to his saintly fundamentals; he had pictured them embracing, weeping. "You look great," he said. "Really terrific."

"Answer me," D'allessandro gestured with the Uzi. "Why did you come to the village?"

"It was Kumari. . . . I wanted to learn about Kumari. Finding you here was just a coincidence."

"Are you certain you're alone? I thought I saw someone else."

"Fuck, yeah! I'm alone . . . all right?"

After a pause, D'allessandro said, "It's good to see you." But his tone was neutral, and he did not lower the gun.

"I've been looking for you all over hell," said Clement, his frustration boiling over. "Six goddamn years! And all you got to say is, 'It's good to see you? Shit!'"

"You shouldn't have looked for me."

"Damn it! You wanted me to find you!"

D'allessandro gave an exasperated sigh and gazed up to the sky as if hoping for guidance. "Roy," he said sadly.

"How are you?" Clement asked. "Are you happy?"

D'allessandro appeared startled. "Yes, I suppose I am."

"That's good, that's good." Clement searched for something else to say, wanting to gain the old man's trust. "So what do you do here? Just hang out and carve the animals?"

"I have books, music . . . a cassette recorder." D'allessandro wore a bemused look. "It may sound austere, but it's a welcome simplicity."

"Great," said Clement, still at a loss for words, but beginning to think that he and D'allessandro were going to get past this moment; that they would soon be sitting in the sun and talking about the future; and being like father and son, clear of their bloody, convoluted past; and they would make new plans and achieve great successes; and D'allessandro would teach him the secrets of absolution and forgetfulness; and that was important, for without absolution and forgetfulness, he wasn't going to make it; and seeing how contented D'allessandro was, he knew those secrets existed, that there must be a way to lift memory from the brain as easily as those magical little screens that kids draw on; and when they peeled back the plastic sheet, what they had drawn would vanish. . . .

"Roy!"

Clement realized that D'allessandro had been speaking. "What is it?"

"Put your hands back on your head."

Clement looked down, surprised to find his hands hanging at his sides.

"Oh, sorry," he said, lifting them. "I was. . . ."

There was a little sound like the whiff of a vacuum-packed can being punctured, and D'allessandro's head exploded, sprays of blood painting stipples on the stone, bone fragments clittering. As the old man toppled, Clement threw himself into a shoulder roll toward the wall, reaching for his automatic, and came up firing at the curtain of yak hair. Continuing to fire, he scrambled over to the body, plucked the Uzi from D'allessandro's hands; he sent a burst of fire into the curtain, making it jerk and dance. Then he got to his feet, edged along the wall toward the curtain; he lifted it away with the barrel of the Uzi, and return fire tore through the braided hair. Clement searched for an option to the corridor. The outer wall. By using the pitted sections for handholds, he thought he would be able to scale it. Whoever had shot D'allessandro would wait for him . . . probably in the corridor. No, they would pull back, knowing that Clement would make a break sooner or later. They would take cover in the boulders outside the gate; at least that was what Clement himself would have done. They wouldn't be looking for him atop the wall. And even if they did, he wouldn't present much of a target.

He sent a burst of fire through the curtain, screaming his anger at the assassin; then he sprinted for the wall, hit it running, hooking his fingers into the rotten stone, digging in with his toes. Less than thirty seconds, and he had reached the top. The stones were barely a foot wide, and the wall planed away to a sheer drop, to the roofs of Tasang-partsi several hundred feet below. The wind tugged at him. His guts seemed to squirm, and he could feel his balls shriveling. He glanced back at the body. Blood had pooled wide as a table beneath it; strands of gray hair lifted in the breeze with the dreamlike irresolution of kelp. The sight consolidated his rage, hardened it into a fierce resolve. They were going to pay for this. Not just the assassin. All the major assholes. He gripped the wall with his knees, and, pushing the Uzi ahead of him, he began to inch his way along.

Before he reached the corner where the wall angled toward the gate, the bitter wind had nearly dislodged him twice. His hands were scraped raw; his shoulders ached. But he felt very clear, very controlled. He lay flat atop the wall, scanning the pitch of boulders, and about seventy-five feet downslope from the gate, he spotted a slice of bright blue. Seconds later the slice expanded to include a dollop of white — a wool hat. The blue was a down jacket. He aimed, but the target disappeared. The assassin kept

shifting, exposing different sections of his body, yet never for long enough. Clement started edging forward again, trying for a better angle and a closer range. After thirty feet he stopped and assumed a firing position, waiting for the assassin to give him a clear shot. He regulated his breathing, relaxed; he drew in a breath and held it. A glimpse of white. Too little exposure. Sliver of blue. *Uh-uh.* He released his held breath, drew in another. Then there it was — a big blue ace centering a blur of gray. Clement squeezed the trigger and heard a cry above the popping of the Uzi. Saw more blue exposed. Gleeful, he poured round after round into the target. Then he listened. Only the humming vibration of the ruins and the ghosting of the wind.

He was pretty sure the assassin was dead, but as he clambered down the broken slanting planks of the gate, he maintained his readiness. He went in a crouch among the boulders until he came to the body. There was too much blood, too many holes in the down jacket, for any life to remain. He nudged the body onto its back with his toe. Long chestnut hair spilled out as the wool cap slipped off, and Lily's eyes stared up at him above the wreckage of her jaw and mouth. There were jellied, unseeing. Clement stared back at her, revulsion growing in him, unable to move, trying to reach with his mind inside the bullet holes and stroke something to life with the pressure of his vision. But the next moment, although he had begun to cry, he wanted to smoke her again.

The goddamn Company!

Oh man! What a great little actress! A natural for the part.

God, you feel so good. You fit me so perfectly. I want you. I love your mouth on me. I . . .

Clement's fury erupted into a scream, and he fired up into the sky, seeing black smoking holes stitched in blue flesh. The clip emptied, and he flung the Uzi away. He felt huge with grief, towering over the events of the morning . . . events that had been contrived for him. They'd really gotten him, they had. He'd never seen it coming.

"But you fucked up," he said. "You should have left me something to care about. Just in case."

He went for a stroll among the boulders. He would have to deal with the bodies; he knew that. He didn't want anybody getting suspicious before he had his round.

"Aw Jesus," he said, remembering Lily. Something cold wrapped long,

curving talons around his heart and squeezed.

Nothing left to do but face the demons. . . . Or maybe he could get back to Tasang-partsi. Maybe Cheni was right, and luck didn't matter anymore. Maybe there would be something for him here. Something he could care about.

And maybe not.

Lily . . . damn!

"You stupid fuckers," he said to the sky. "You write yourself a great play, get yourself prime talent, and then you blow the ending."

But that's cool.

He had an idea for a terrific third act.

A WEEK AFTER Clement's return from Tasang-partsi, a week during which fires bloomed in American embassies all over Asia, he broke into Rice's home in Katmandu and prowled about the place, digging in drawers, discovering little of interest apart from several handguns and a variety of sexual aids. He unloaded all of the guns except for a .44 Magnum, which he fitted with a silencer. Then he sat down to wait for Rice in the den. Rice had fixed the room up with walnut paneling, a green shag carpet, bookshelves, a wet bar, leather chairs and sofa, and Clement liked the American ambience, although the lighting was a touch too yellow for his tastes. He laid the gun on the arm of a chair, leafed through some old *Time* magazines, and, having exhausted these, opened the latest Robert Ludlum thriller. Shouts and laughter and music came from the street — it was a festival night, and the city was thronged with celebrants. Listening to them, Clement felt lighthearted and clear in his mind; but this was mostly because he knew he was cutting his final ties with a world in which he had lived his entire life, that once the night was done, he would be irrevocably disconnected. The thought sobered him, yet was not in the least displeasing. He went to the bar, poured himself a bourbon on the rocks, and toasted his freedom. Then he sat down again and reopened the Ludlum. He was three murders into the book when he heard Rice's car pulling up.

He killed the lights and went into the darkened living room; through the window he saw Rice and a heavysset, balding man in a tweed overcoat, whom he recognized as Clark Settlemyre, an assistant to the Director. That Settlemyre was along both gladdened his heart and rekindled his

anger. The more the fucking merrier, he thought. He went back into the den and stood behind the door, certain that they would be having a night-cap. A minute later the door opened, the lights were switched on, and the two men entered and walked over to the bar. Hidden by the door, watching through the crack below one hinge, Clement enjoyed the feeling of cold implacability that the sight of their backs gave him.

"Have a seat," said Rice, shrugging out of his overcoat.

"I've been sitting all day," said Settlemyre; he had a deep, presidential voice that matched the blunt strength of his features. He ran his eye along the bookshelves.

Rice mixed, poured. "I think you're wrong about Clement."

Settlemyre shrugged as if Rice's opinion were unimportant.

"Clement's a doer," said Rice. "Not a schemer. I can see him gettin' in a snit and blowin' somebody's brains out. But whoever's been mailin' these bombs has. . . ."

"Whoever it is," said Settlemyre, "knows security procedures like the back of his hand. It has to be someone with Clement's level of clearance."

"True," said Rice. "But I'm gonna withhold judgment till I hear from Lily."

"If we hear from her."

"I think I can clear this up, fellas," said Clement, stepping from behind the door. "It was me blowed up all yer buddies."

Rice's hand darted toward the inside of his coat. Clement blew a wine decanter at his elbow into a shower of icy splinters, and Rice ducked, then froze.

"A wise choice, pal," said Clement. "Because I'm crazy to kill. So why don't you take the gun out with your left hand and toss it over here?"

"What is this shit, man?" said Rice. "What's the—"

Clement aimed the Magnum at Rice's forehead, and Rice did as he'd been told.

"How 'bout you, Clark?" said Clement. "Are we packing tonight, or are we dressed for success?"

"I don't have a weapon," said Settlemyre.

"Let's be certain, now," said Clement brightly. "The punishment for wrong answers is lots and lots of pain." He injected menace into his tone.

"I mean it."

"I have no weapon."

"Know what, Clark? I believe you. I bet you'd rather die than fib. But why don't we just open our coat . . . just to make me happy."

Settlemyre complied; his face was unreadable, but Rice looked anxious.

"You gonna tell us what this is alla 'bout?" he asked.

Clement arched an eyebrow. "You don't know? Golly, I would have bet you had to know." He formed his face into a solemn mask and affected a southern accent. "Miz Lily has met with a tragic fate." Saying that hurt him, and he covered his emotion with a laugh. "As has that dastard D'allessandro. In both instances, it was not a fate worse than death. . . . Get my meaning?"

Rice said, "Jesus," and Settlemyre said, "D'allessandro is in Mustang?"

"Was," said Clement, restraining his anger.

"I think —," Settlemyre began.

"You motherfucker," said Clement. "I'm going to go easy on Rice. But you, I'm going to do you slow. Know why? Because you're the one wanted D'allessandro. It was your pride on the line. You and all the major assholes in D.C. That's all it was . . . goddamn pride."

"You should take time to examine the situation, Clement," Settlemyre said. "Things may not be quite so cut-and-dried as they seem."

"Terrific idea! Clark, why don't you sit down over there." Clement gestured with the gun to one of the leather chairs. "And you" — he looked at Rice — "you come over here."

"C'mon, man," said Rice.

"Over here!" said Clement. "Now!"

He directed Rice to stand at the right of the leather chair opposite the one in which Settlemyre had taken a seat; then he sat down and jammed the silencer into Rice's groin. He could feel Rice quivering.

"Please," said Rice. "Please, don't."

"Everybody comfy?" asked Clement. "Good." He smiled at Settlemyre. "O.K. . . . talk."

"You have to be a realist about all this," said Settlemyre. "I know you're upset, and I realize you don't particularly want to hear that. But you know that's how you should deal with it."

"Roy," said Rice plaintively.

"Shut the fuck up!" Clement glanced up at him. "This could be an important lesson for you . . . that is, if you believe in reincarnation. You believe in reincarnation, man?"

"Don't do this, Roy. Don't —"

"All you're going to hear, pal, is a little whiff. Pffft! Then you're going to blow backward into the wall and slide down like a dead snake. I wonder if you'll feel any pain. Gunshot wounds were never my best subject. But I bet your balls will be dead before you are."

Rice started to plead his case again, but Settlemyre told him to keep quiet.

"Do you want retribution?" he said to Clement. "Or would you prefer to live?"

"You mean I dare hope?"

"Your sarcasm is amusing," said Settlemyre. "But this situation surely merits more than sarcasm." He crossed his legs, pulling his features into a grave expression. "Now I realize, of course, that you can't trust me. But you're aware of my power, and you must know that with the use of a little acumen, you can win guarantees from me that I won't be able to rescind until you've reached safety. You can survive this if you decide to be a realist. If, however, you insist on playing the role of grief-stricken avenger, then there's nothing I can do for you."

Rice was easing back from the gun, and Clement prodded him hard to keep him still.

"I can understand how you've become such a mover and shaker, Clark," said Clement. "That was nicely spoken, nicely done . . . the way you tried to turn the tables on me. Under any other circumstance, it would have been incredibly effective. Really, I mean it. But the problem is, I just don't give a fuck about alternatives. I'm not playing anymore, and there's not a thing you can do for me except die. Besides, I might have a few moves that would surprise you."

"Oh?" said Settlemyre, maintaining his poise. "What might they be?"

"I *could* tell you, Clark. I know you'd keep it to yourself. But I don't care that much about satisfying your curiosity. I hate your guts. You're the kind of slug that makes nights like this an inevitability." He looked up at Rice, who was staring straight ahead, his chin trembling. "So how you doing there, pal?"

Rice's Adam's apple worked, and he let out a sobbing breath; his hands shook; his fingers curled.

"No shit . . . that bad, huh?"

With a marked effort, Rice steadied himself. "Lemme go, man. You

know none of this was my decision."

"Lily," said Clement, his heart aching with hate. "That one hurt."

"I'm just a fuckin' soldier, man . . . like you."

"How long?" asked Clement. "How long was she working for you?"

When Rice seemed reluctant to answer, Clement jabbed with the gun, doubling him over, and repeated the question. Rice sucked in air; tears spilled from his eyes. "Was it from the beginning?" asked Clement. "Just nod."

Rice nodded.

"From the beginning." Clement was having a problem holding onto his train of thought. "This was all about D'allessandro? That's all?"

Settlemyre said, "What would you expect?"

"I'll be right with you, Clark," said Clement; then, to Rice: "Remember what I said about learning a lesson?"

"What? No . . . yeah, I—"

"Don't strain yourself, pal. The lesson is, free will can be fun."

Rice blinked, swallowed. He kept his eyes on the wall, his mouth opening and closing.

"Remember that little sound I told you about? Pffft?"

"Roy . . . Christ!"

"Listen," said Clement, and fired.

As Rice flew backward, Clement caught movement out of the corner of his eye and threw himself sideways in the chair. He felt a tremendous jolt high in his chest that added to his momentum, heard an explosive report, and he went over onto the floor, firing in the general direction of Settlemyre. He sat up, his back to the wall. Blink. Settlemyre was still sitting in his chair, the upper portion of his skull was missing . . . or not exactly missing. Most of it had gone to create a Jackson Pollock effect in reds and grays on the wall behind him. Rice was lying on his side, curled up against the wall, his head wedged upright, and he appeared to be gazing with interest at the lower shelf of the bookcase, as if hunting for a pertinent reference work. Islands of his blood figured the tangle of a green sage sea. Clement closed his eyes. He probed his wound gingerly and felt the ridged-up flesh of the edge of the bullet hole just under the collarbone. It hurt like fire.

Shoulda searched the asshole, shoulda known he'd use Rice to make a move . . . a fuckup to the last.

He probed his wound again.

Couldn't have been much of a gun. Fucking sissy gun. The bastard probably had carried it concealed in his garter belt.

But it had done its job.

He had another look at the room. Hell, he thought, would open like this. Under the sickly yellow lights, a flat of carnage and gore, dapplings of red and gray, a still life with corpses painted upon a curtain that, once it was lifted, would allow everlasting blackness to flow out over the audience.

Ah God! That hurts . . . Jesus!

Wincing, he hauled himself to his feet, wavered, almost fell. Black nebular shapes were floating in front of his eyes. After the pain had settled, he wobbled over to the bar and poured a bourbon. He slugged it down. Poured another. He repeated the process several times and felt much better. Maybe, he thought, he could make it back to Tasang-partsi.

But the first step he took away from the bar told him how foolish a notion that had been.

It was just as well, he thought; there probably was nothing for him in Tasang-partsi except the opportunity for another fuckup. Still, he wouldn't have minded seeing Cheni again. Not that they could offer one another much in the way of consolation. But they'd had *something* going, something that — although he couldn't have explained why — had seemed of importance. Or maybe that was merely a delusion. Delusion was always a possibility.

The whiskey had steadied him, and he thought it would be good to get out of Rice's house and walk somewhere. It had been a long time since he'd had the chance just to walk around and feel the breeze without anything preying on his mind.

Not since . . . shit!

He remembered Eddie Lavigne.

Eddie! Christ, how long's it been!

Twenty-three years, bozo! What the fuck you been doing with yourself!

Dying, Eddie. I been dying all that time.

You always were a morbid asshole. Hey, 'member when we busted out of the orphanage!

Fucking A. . . . It was great!

Great! You ran out on me!

What'd you expect, man? You freaked out!

The hell I did!

The hell you didn't! We were crossing this field, remember, and we saw this horse, grazing, and you said we should steal the fucker, ride it. But we were too short to get up on it, so you started yelling at the horse, jumping up and down, waving your arms, and the damn thing just keels over on its side. Dead. You claimed you'd killed it, that you had vast mental powers. You said if I didn't do what you told me to, you'd zap me with your mind ray."

...

Eddie!

...

Hey, Eddie!

Clement.

A cold, intimidating voice.

Who's that?

Kumari.

Cold, black, deep as forever.

Oh yeah!

I need you, Clement.

Why me?

You have done evil, but your heart is pure.

Clement laughed giddily and realized that he was starting to fade. Time to get out of there. The front of his shirt was soaked with blood. He grabbed Rice's overcoat, pulled it on, and buttoned it to hide the mess. Then he poured himself another bourbon. He glanced at Rice and Settlemyre. Brothers in the bond, no matter how despicable they were. He wondered what it would be like to be clean and innocent and full of hope.

This world is a shadow, Clement, and what you have done is cause for neither contrition nor pride.

"Is that so?"

Purity is not morality, it is a condition of fate. It has been your fate to be a child at war and pure, and thus you can be useful to me.

"Sorry," he said. "Got a previous engagement."

He went staggering through the darkened house and out into the street. Crowds of dark, wild-eyed men in loose white cotton shirts and trousers. The darkness was music and incense, cut by channels of torch-

light and glitter. As he headed for Durbar Square and the heart of the city, he spotted some men in suits who looked very much like Company men. They were craning their necks, casting searching glances in every direction, and Clement realized that they must have been following Rice in hopes he might show up; they had probably seen him leaving the house. He worked his way to the center of the crowd to hide from the men, and then, growing weaker, disoriented, he let the press carry him along, turning this way and that, and finally pouring into a wide street lined by wooden stalls with hotly lit interiors and necklaces of light bulbs that illuminated signs lettered in both English and Newar. Like tiny stages in which dozens of two- and three-character plays were being performed. Men hunched over sewing machines and cobbler's benches, men hammering inlay into copper plates. Offering scarves and rings and charms. The jostling of the crowd had worn away Clement's reserves, and he pushed toward one of the stalls, a place no larger than a toolshed, in which a pudgy man was embroidering a shirt. Clement slumped against the wall, slid down into a sitting position and stared at the forest of legs moving past, feeling numb. Somebody tapped him on the shoulder. The stallkeeper, his swarthy face crimped by a frown.

"No stay," he said, shaking a finger at Clement. "No!"

Clement dug a handful of bills from his pocket and thrust them at the man. "Just a few minutes, O.K.?"

The frown vanished along with the bills.

"O.K.," said the stallkeeper, beaming, bowing. "O.K."

The music drifted around Clement, and he felt at peace. Somehow he didn't believe it was right that he should be at peace. He should be torn apart and tortured for his crimes.

But peace was cool with him, if it was cool with everybody else.

Beyond the market was a three-story building of crumbling, striated brick, with slices of light leaking through shuttered windows. Shadows were hundreds of deaths moving behind them.

Can't scare me.

Hey, Cheni! There's worse than being unlucky.

"Right, D'allessandro?" he said.

You're absolutely right, Roy.

"Bet your ass!"

Born under a bad sign, been down since I began to crawl, and if it

wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all.

No luck at all, Cheni. . . . That's really the pits.

But no luck wasn't an excuse. He wasn't going to hide behind excuses at this point.

He fingered the wooden tiger from his pocket and looked it in the eyes.

"What do you think?"

You were hard wood to work, Roy, but I finally got you right.

I loved you, old man.

Please, Roy . . . love!

Pretty stupid, huh!

The stallkeeper tapped his shoulder again and handed him a cup. Tea.

Clement thanked him, set the cup down.

Can't drink it; might spring a leak.

I'm a little teapot, short and stout; just tip me over and. . .

Fuck that shit!

He set the tiger beside the cup, facing toward the crowd.

You stay there, pal, and keep watch for demons.

His wound throbbed like a sick heart; a wave of sweet dissolution rushed from his center outward.

Clement.

That cold voice again.

Go away!

Look at me, Clement.

He lifted his head wearily. The crowd had parted, torchbearers were approaching, and behind them, a platform draped in peach-colored silk borne on the shoulders of six men in maroon robes. Seated on the platform was a Newar girl of about twelve, clad in gilt cloth. Her black eyes opened for him like tunnels through golden flesh, and he flowed along them, through the bleak serenity of the girl's presence, a presence that struck him as being both masculine and feminine, until he touched another presence, one more erratic, touched it briefly, long enough to acknowledge an intimacy that was better than love, better even than trust, one that he'd been too earthbound to accept and that Cheni had been too distraught to convey, a unity that was too individual to have a name. Then the contact was broken, and he was looking up at the girl, who had climbed down from her platform. Her black, black eyes were swelling, pushing toward him, threatening to burst and loose a flood of blackness.

"No," he said, "I don't want this."

He clutched the wooden tiger as if it were a charm, and tried to struggle to his feet, but he was too weak. He was having trouble focusing; the world was dissolving into a blur of streaming light. Except for the girl. Her features were sharp, and the gold fabric of her dress looked to have an infinite depth. She met his eyes, and once again he had a doubled sense of her, of elements both masculine and feminine. He remembered what Cheni had said about Kumari's ally against the demons. Her shield. He was beginning to put everything together, everything that had occurred in Mustang and since, beginning to understand the nature of the unity between him and Cheni, and what would be the result. But he wasn't ready to accept it.

I need you, Clement.

This had to be craziness, he thought. More delusion. Why, after all, would he be the one chosen?

It is no reward.

Oh yeah . . . forgot about that.

The blackness of Kumari's eyes poured over him, and, mounted upon the field of darkness, like a rip in the fabric of night, he saw a Khambu tribesman, a Tibetan soldier engaged in the slaughter of the Chinese, who had driven him from his homeland; and then the man, weary of war, joined company with a distraught, anguished woman, who — though she resisted at first — became his lover; and shortly thereafter, wounded by his enemies, the man lay dying at the feet of a little girl in golden cloth as the blackness of her eyes swept over him. . . .

Clement felt a tearing pain that seemed to have nothing to do with his wound, yet he couldn't locate the source. He pushed the pain aside and watched the Khambu tribesman falling through darkness toward a golden light, and understood that the man was melding with the blackness of Kumari, becoming part of an ancient process; and when the blackness penetrated the light, it was wedded to the soul of a newborn girl child; and soon priest came for the girl and bore her away to a temple, where she was pampered and paraded before the faithful on festival days, and. . . .

The pain was recurring with increasing frequency, and Clement had to exert all his self-control in order to concentrate on what he was seeing. . . .

. . . did battle with the emptiness who menaced all and everything, enduring terrible agony and loneliness, aided by that soldierly essence

with whom she had allied herself, until the time came when a new incarnation must be chosen and the worn scrap of the Khambu's soul would be given its release, and the girl stood in the market of Katmandu above a dying American and instructed him as the nature of his fate.

Clement wanted to pull back from the vision, but found that he could not, that he was falling toward a distant golden light. Frightened, he twisted and turned, but he had no option other than to confront the pain that was now assaulting him from every side, huge ebony shadows veering close to tear at him; and it wasn't fair, he thought, it wasn't fair at all . . . even though there was a certain justice involved. He had to find some means of easing the pain, and he fixed on the golden light. It didn't much look like an opening, he thought. Solid and serene like Kumari, like a fat autumn moon floating over the emptiness of a Wyoming night; and he could have sworn he had seen it before from just this angle, from just this fearful perspective, hiding in a barn the night he'd split from Eddie Lavigne, wondering what monster might come out of the dark to rip him apart with its teeth, wondering if there would ever be an end to solitude and grief. . . .

Clement!

Another cold voice . . . or was it the same one?

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... and then his grief was subsumed into the light; and it felt strange to be free of grief, as if half his weight had been taken away; and he was drifting toward that golden moon, sleepy, afraid that something would snatch him while he slept, but too sleepy to sustain fear. . . .

Clement!

... and he felt much lighter now, disconnected, his thoughts eddying; and he gazed at the wooden tiger someone had given him, liking the way it stood there, facing the battles ahead with fierce frozen glare; and seeing it gave him courage. . . .

Y'hear me, Clement!

... and courage made anything bearable — sorrow, pain, even being shaken, shaken hard — and he thought someday he would look back on this night, this one night in which was bound up the entire character of his life, with the clean smell of hay and the sounds of semis hitting the spacers on the highway winding through the mountains, and loneliness closing down around him, muffling emotion. . . .

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"Damn you, Clement!"

More shaking.

... he might look back and know that it had been a pretty good time. ...

"Clement!"

The pain had started up again. His eyes blinked open, and he saw a man with a gun standing above him, and another man kneeling beside him. Demons ... no doubt about it. Their suits and pale skins were containers of emptiness, of blackness. Kumari was behind them, a crowd of monks and celebrants ranged around her, all intent upon him. He focused on the man with the gun, and saw that deep within the black tunnel of the barrel, the golden full moon was shining.

"Oh," he said, and gave a weak laugh.

The man with the gun said, "Dying must be fun, huh, Clement?"

"We might be able to patch him up," said the man kneeling. "Hear that, asshole? You might just live to do a little suffering."

He asked Clement a question, but Clement paid it no attention.

The pain was getting very bad. He stared at the shining moon within the gun barrel.

If you have nowhere to run, you have to make a stand.

He twitched his head toward Kumari, and she nodded.

Swirling music, and the moonlit clouds on fire.

Guess I'll go away.

The man who had been kneeling got to his feet, beckoned to someone; he asked another question of Clement, but Clement only smiled, keeping his eyes on that tiny golden moon. He squeezed the wooden tiger tightly in his fist, imagining that his soul was shrinking to conform to that compact, lethal shape. Then, summoning all his strength, he made a quick little move as if toward a shoulder holster inside the overcoat.

And fell through darkness into the light.



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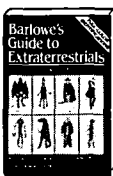
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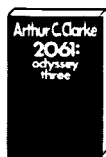
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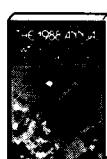
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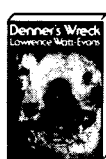
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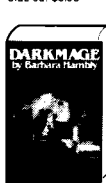
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